



TWO HANGMEN, ONE SCAFFOLD

BOOK II:
IN THE HANGMAN'S SHADOW



BASIL DIKI

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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Two Hangmen, One Scaffold In The Hangman's Shadow Book II

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Foreword

As stated in Book I, *Baiting the Hangman*, actual events inspired *Two Hangmen, One Scaffold*. Because Book I technically ended in a catastrophe, *In the Hangman's Shadow* is not strictly a sequel to Book I *per se*, but a pertinent continuation of the story. (NB: In pursuance of an editorial recommendation, I had to split the tale into two, *Baiting the Hangman* and *In the Hangman's Shadow*, for technical conformity; otherwise, the two books are components of one story though both are technically readable on their own).

I remain profoundly thankful to my heroes, the anonymous illegal gold diggers in my country, who volunteered tales of their experiences in defunct gold mines. Of course, without The Great Dance, *Gule Wamkulu*, or *Nyau*, narrations by its practitioners who conveniently chose anonymity by virtue of their membership to a secret society, the tale would've acquired a different character. As stated in *Baiting the Hangman* (Book I), aspects of this cult herein are without favour or bias. The Johannes Masowe Apostolic Sect, founded in 1932, was a flourishing faith in Zimbabwe and many southern African countries at the time of writing this story. (The sect's songs and prayers in this story are verbatim and their bracketed English versions transliterate)

Some residents of Empress and Venice mines, at the time of writing operational and closed respectively, will testify of the coming to the area of a criminal gang that defied arrest and axed many people. Led by one Jajaraza, a sobriquet for 'Decapitator', the group operated at its peak between 2005 and the time of its spirited leader's death sometime in 2007. *Two Hangmen, One Scaffold* is a fictionalised attempt to tell the tale of this killer and his gang, and the criminal psyche that propelled it beyond criminological understanding.

Basil Diki,
Harare

Prologue

Matipa found it unc customary to stand erect in the doorway when a respectable man was squatting. She sank on her knees, her hands clasped respectfully like his. However, when she looked over the men's shoulder at the apostolic men under the mango tree, she learnt their number had more than doubled. Four trendily dressed men had joined Remegio and the elders still engaged in inviting Joshua to the land. The intruders squatted in a semi-circle around the believers. One of the men had a five-litre plastic container. Matipa supposed the container held ordinary water the bearer brought for sanctification. It was customary for non-believers to ask apostolic members, especially the sect's elders and prophets, to sanctify or bless various items for them. When she looked at the shrub, the vulture had gone.

"Madam, allow Bomani to greet you and introduce himself." The stranger spoke like a pope uttering a benediction. His bearing was priestly. "How're you, madam?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said, forcing a smile, and assuring herself there just was no need for her to be afraid of such a respectful man. However, half-formulated fear held her bowels. "But I can't help wondering who has called on us. You come at a terrible time—" She stopped abruptly, realising she was panicking and about to confide in the stranger.

"Bomani doesn't really understand you when you say he comes at a terrible time in your life. What Bomani knows is that terrible times are definitely coming."

"I insist, who am I talking to?"

"At birth his parents named him Bomani, which means warrior," he continued like a Catholic cardinal reading a canonical citation, his voice and its suppleness reflective of a man in total control of himself. "Later, respected figures initiated and gave him a second name—Kumanda, which means graveyard. In the land of snails, mists,

mountains and diamonds where Bomani is coming from, he's a respected professional." He stopped briefly. "Madam, Bomani Kumanda is an old friend of Binga."

"Binga? I don't understand. I suppose you're lost."

"The warrior has travelled nearly five hundred kilometres to see him."

"I doubt if you've come to the right place. My husband is Akar, Akar Muja."

"Bomani seeks Binga Jochoma. He's come to the right place."

"I've no knowledge of the man you seek. Who's Binga?"

"Madam, you know as much as Bomani does that Binga is your husband." His voice remained level. "Supposing you didn't know, then you can as well learn now that Binga is his other name. You cannot shield him from Bomani. The warrior learnt Binga left two weeks ago. Where could he be?"

She refrained from believing this stranger. The last time she had heard someone speaking in tones like his was by Pope Benedict XVI when he presided at the beatification of Pope John Paul. She witnessed the ceremony live on satellite television. A twanging voice within her sought to convince her that this was the prophesied demon, but reason overrode it arguing the courteous man was lost and would not admit it.

"I'd want to help you, but by insisting wrongly my husband is Binga, you mislead yourself. I suggest you describe him a little."

"God gave us everything except time."

"May I know why you're looking for this man?"

He smiled drily. "Is it out of vulgar curiosity that you ask, madam?"

"I'm not given to weird motivations. It isn't my nature to be rude, but I don't know how to tell you that you're lost. There's no one by that name in this compound. Kindly go and look for this Binga elsewhere. I'm sorry."

He laughed, a dramatic ha-ha-ha. “You give Bomani the impression you’re not close to your husband.”

“I’ve already told you, *Binga* isn’t my husband. I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Bomani was fortunate enough to avoid marriage this far, but from what he hears, he’s tempted to believe a husband and a wife ought to confide in each other.” He paused and rubbed his hands respectfully. “Because you ask many questions, Bomani’ll answer you with a question. It takes a missile to destroy ballistic missiles. You’ll excuse the exegeses, but when Abraham pursued the enemy to recover Lot and looted Jewish property, on his way back, he had the gracious honour to meet Melchizedek. The question Bomani poses to you, madam, is; did the two men, both divine and mysterious, merely exchange greetings and part? Be reminded Abraham was a friend of God. Both men were cut from the same cloth.”

She wanted to consider the question and its significance then answer him, but he had mentally toppled her. For a fraction of a minute, she couldn’t think rationally. Instead, she wondered if a demon could cite holy men in its speech. No, this man wasn’t the prophesied evil. When she was about to tell him he was incomprehensible, and incomprehensibility wouldn’t lead him to the man he was looking for, he turned his head and faced her. She nearly suffered a cardiac arrest.

For the first time she looked at his face squarely. His entire upper and lower front teeth were missing. Scars disfigured his face. His cheekbones were jutting, the jaws angular. His eyes were bloodshot, boring, cold and almost reptilian, rendering his gaze petulant. Above his left eye were surgical stitch marks. Below his eyes were neat traditional cicatrix marks. He wore double strings of small red and blue beads around his wrists. People who delved into ancestral spirits, mostly sorcerers and herbalists, wore such beads. His palms were heavily calloused.

Doubt vanished from her. A cold wave ran down her spine. She remembered the prophet's words: *the plumage of the raven is his clothing*. The man squatting a few metres from her was the demon. Instinct dictated to her to scream. No words came from her mouth though it opened. She shook as if suddenly stricken by Alzheimer's disease.

"Terrible times are come. This place shall not know peace until your husband presents himself to Bomani. The warrior bans all church gatherings in the hills and in this compound including the one behind Bomani under the mango tree. No one shall collect firewood or go to their field until Bomani meets Binga. In other words, Bomani is declaring a round the clock curfew and decrees bloodshed beginning now." He brought his right hand to his chin, clipped his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger and sucked in air, whistling once and shrilly. He brought his hand down and bared the gaps in his mouth to her in a weird smile.

Under the mango tree, the elders stopped singing unceremoniously, and a scuffle seemed to have ensued. Then she saw Remegio pinned to the ground and gesturing. Gesturing and pleading for mercy as though he were strapped to a guillotine. Two of the four intruders held him down. The one with the container was on his feet pouring its contents over the teenager, drenching his garments. The fourth man stood guard, a machete in his hand. She couldn't understand what was happening.

Was this a reversal of roles; normally sect members drenched believers with holy water during exorcism. Were the men performing some baptismal gimmick on the teenager? The man pouring the unknown substance all over Remegio stepped back, throwing the container at the teenager's feet and digging his hand into a hip pocket as his colleagues let go of the young man and retreated from the small group. Remegio was rising and making a bewildered gesture facing the man who dosed him when the man struck a match and cast the burning stick at the teenager.

Matipa watched in horror as a small flame hit *Madzibaba* Remegio on the chest. Searing tongues of yellow and blue fire engulfed the teenager and the container on the ground. He slumped on the ground and began screaming. The intruders were immolating Remegio in a scenario reminiscent of the brutal South African xenophobic attack pictures she watched on TV; recalling the disturbing images of black foreigners in that country when they were set on fire alive in the streets of shanty settlements.

Her initial reaction was denial. No! No man can be this cruel to another! It's a realistic nightmare. Nevertheless, the fire on Remegio was ferocious, burning with a crackling sound and sending columns of thick smoke into the boughs of the tree. Still screaming and now trying to beat out the flames, the acolyte staggered to his feet and dashed from the tree. She wanted to rise and flee the scene, but she fell back into the lounge, slumping hard on the floor. He ran as a beheaded cock let loose. The other apostolic members fled in different directions.

Someone had better help, she thought as she watched him bump into the wall of a hut of pole and clay next to the Muja's, fall to the ground and begin to roll back and forth kicking frantically. Though he kept screaming in agony, the screams diminished with his vanishing garments and skin. Remegio's images danced in her glazed eyes filling with tears.

His screams drew people out of their huts, cabins and shanks. Some men came running to find out the cause of the commotion, and perhaps to help, but halted, cringed and held their heads as the teenager rolled, kicked and blazed. Bomani's men waved them away with machetes. The cautious witnessed the horror through open windows, while the overcautious opened neither door nor window. Charred remains of Remegio's garments clung to his blackened body, raw with burns in many places. He lay on his back pressed against the hut, his arms stiff and half-raised in the air, his knees propping up

involuntarily. The screams died, but he was grunting and puffing smoke.

Matipa looked about. All their neighbours had suddenly locked up their dwellings and vanished. Coldness settled on her spine as she grasped that everyone in the compound had anticipated the arrival of the demon and was too petrified to come to Remegio's rescue. The fact that people had either fled the scene or locked themselves in their dwellings, meant the compound dwellers weren't underestimating evil's potential to maelstrom into their lives and destroy them, if they intervened. She was on her own.

The immolator came and stood over Remegio. Between the henchman's legs, Matipa saw that the teenager was jerking and frothing. The nauseating smell of burnt human flesh pervaded the air as the remnants of the teenager's garments smouldered. Matipa felt some warmth in her undergarments and beneath her fundament. When she brought her eyes down, she saw that she was sitting in a pool of her urine. By staying, it appeared she hadn't only signed her death warrant, but that of Peza and several people.

In his dramatic bearing as an exponent of courtesy, Bomani rose, unhurriedly, and turned. For the first time he looked at the brutality which had taken place behind his back, and nodded satisfaction.

"Beautify the blockhead!" He shouted to the man over Remegio.

The man reached into his groin and drew a small metallic, homemade axe from his trousers. Matipa noticed the weapon was the same size and length her husband tried to attack Mr Gilchrist Keneas with. Pressing his left foot on Remegio's chest and holding him down with his weight, the man stooped over Remegio and brought the axe down on the teenager's head in three successive swings.

Matipa looked away as the young man jerked, cried and pleaded for his life with words and gestures. She turned a while later to watch the scene despite the admonition in her not to witness a brutal murder. The man cut him some more and put away the axe. Another

man handed him a small gourd decorated with red and blue beads around its mid-section.

He uncorked the gourd and tapped a dark substance from the container onto his right palm. Squatting, he rubbed the substance on Remegio's bleeding wounds and forehead, blackening the areas. Matipa feared the injured teenager was set to die. She sensed it from his growls, grunts, murmurs and the blood oozing from his head. The man corked the gourd again, pocketed it and stood up. He pulled down the zip of his trousers and pulled out his manhood. Stepping back a pace, he urinated on Remegio's head and shoulders.

Bomani drew Matipa's attention when he rose and quickly crossed to her. She wanted to rise and flee, but she was powerless.

He looked down at her. "Binga must come alone. When the time comes, he'll know where to find Bomani. The warrior will open a communication link with him. Bomani'll meet him among the dead. What guarantee do you offer Bomani you'll convey the message to Binga?"

She was too shocked to think soundly, to accept the reality unfolding before her and that this was the ill-fated day. Her lips quivered. She wanted to assure him he had her word. That she would inform her husband of Bomani's visit. That it would precede her greeting and ushering Akar Muja into their dwelling upon his return. Terror failed her, and she felt extremely cold.

"Leviticus says *the life of the flesh is in the blood*. Bomani can do with your menstrual blood." He stuck out his tongue and wriggled it. "Let Bomani drink the blood and he'll take his leave."

She gaped at him in open disbelief.

"Bomani takes your silence to mean it's either beneath you to collect your menstrual blood or it's not the days for your periods. Handing over your blood would've made things significantly easier, madam." He paused and narrowed his eyes. "Bomani knows you've a son. Peza is his name." He stretched out his right hand, the palm

facing up. “Hand over the boy. Binga must fetch the boy from Bomani. This is the only guarantee Bomani is accepting. Where’s Peza?”

“I can’t do that without his... his father’s consent,” she protested intending to rise and restrain Bomani physically.

“That’s a foolish argument, madam.” He showed her his palms. “Peza’ll be in good hands for a few days; thereafter he may return and describe to you the pleasures and pains of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

“Please, whatever it is, keep my son out of it. He’s innocent.”

“If Bomani’s patience runs out the way it usually does, Bomani’ll cut him into thin ribbons and wear him like a mayoral medal. Of course, you won’t have to bury the head of a goat in lieu of your son’s body. Bomani’ll bring his skull to you for burial. He isn’t a heartless man, madam.”

The stranger stepped over her and a pungent smell assaulted her. He smelled of faeces and urine. In the lounge, he stopped and looked around. As he scanned the room with his eyes, he continued leisurely, “Bomani isn’t a tsunami. He knows no pain can surpass the agony of knowing a dear one lays dead and unburied somewhere. If the worst comes to the worst, Bomani promises you a proper burial for the boy’s skull. If you’re Catholic and the situation permits, Bomani might provide requiem for the boy’s torso. The boy is young and without sin. People his age ascend straight to Heaven when they die. Rites of sepulchre are a good religious send-off, madam. You’ll note the use of the word *religious*.”

Matipa held her breath. “I beg you to leave my son out of this. Please—”

The stranger stared at the closed bedroom door for a while and stroked his cheek thoughtfully. He looked over his shoulder at her. “Tell Binga to bring a spot-free black hen.” He grinned, shook his head and turned as if to exit, only to swing and spring at the inner

door, breaking and knocking it down. Matipa screamed and felt something akin to labour pains in her lower abdomen, but he was already in the bedroom and scanning it with his eyes, his back arched and his arms spread in anticipation of grabbing the boy.

Suddenly she stopped screaming; Peza wasn't in the bedroom. The wardrobe doors were wide open, and the bedroom window she had left closed was ajar. Its curtain flapped in the wind outside. Peza had certainly fled through the window. She remembered the boy telling her he would run. Sighing with relief, she was glad he was cunning and had run.

"Bomani doesn't speak empty threats," he said, looking around, his voice still cathedral. "Bomani knows the boy is here. He can smell him like garlic. Should Binga come with the police or any other company, Peza won't have time to receive his last rites. Bomani'll decapitate both father and son. Vultures and jackals will devour them. From that day until the day you die, madam, you'll not know sorrow more agonising. Bomani guarantee's you that."

His words and manner of speaking instilled fear in her. She told herself not to consider his rhetoric. She had to remain within her faculties to formulate a defensive framework. Though she worried about Peza, she was sure Bomani wouldn't catch up with the boy if he looked out the window and saw him fleeing. Even if the stranger gave chase and caught up with him, Peza had the dexterity to dodge him at close range in the way a hare would frustrate and tire a greyhound.

The intruder vainly peered in the wardrobe and slammed the unit's doors. He looked under the bed, kicked the set in anger and crossed to the window, to look out. Something below the ledge caught his attention. He quickly reached down outside the house, grabbed something cumbersome and began to pull. She felt faint as he pulled Peza back into the bedroom.

With one hand, he held the boy balanced on the ledge and with his other, freed the boy's rear waistband buckle caught in the window's lever stud, the culprit that caught Peza and stopped him from fleeing. Turning, he held the boy with both hands and heaved him from the ledge. He peered into the boy's face, and sniffed it like a dog trying to establish and ascertain long lost kinship. He performed the weird act with Peza suspended in the air, and no strain showing on the man's face.

Peza wriggled and struggled, his eyes on her on the floor, heart-stalling fear in them. He stretched his hands towards her for protection. All she could do was ogle, tears clouding her eyes, hope deserting her. Despite herself, she was certain the stranger would kill her son. Bomani smiled reassuringly into Peza's face as he brought him down. She was relieved he was capable of smiling. Assumingly, he was a father and Peza reminded him of his children or their vulnerability.

"In war, women and innocent children suffer the most," he said to the boy. "The tenth plague of Egypt terminated young lives. The Egyptians mourned." He smiled again into his face and placed his left hand on his shoulder. "Blood marked the coming of the Lord into our midst." He stroked the boy's shoulder. "Abortionists make sure some children don't see daylight. You're very lucky to have seen daylight. However, in this world daylight and darkness interchange." Suddenly he straightened and slapped the boy hard across the left temple.

In the room, the sound of the smack was a miniature slap of thunder. Peza yelled in pain and lost balance. With the speed of a boxer, Bomani jabbed him with a clenched fist above the right eye before he fell, sending him flying into the side of the wardrobe. The unit's exterior mirror shattered. The subsequent noise was as if a dozen empty bottles had crushed on a hard surface. The boy, dazed and motionless, lay at Bomani's feet amid shards of broken glass.

Matipa held her head and heard a strange bewildered wail. It was her voice. Perhaps the wail would draw the neighbours, a vain hope against her sensibilities. Who would come after seeing Remegio aflame?

The intruder picked the placid boy and placed him on his left shoulder, Peza's head and arms hanging limply behind the man's back. Matipa struggled to her feet and staggered in blind fury into the bedroom. No weapon or object she could improvise into one lay between her and the demon. With her hands and teeth, she would rip the man apart and pry Peza from this animal. Like a distressed rhinoceros, she approached him.

Bomani was ready for her. He raised his right leg, turned sideward slightly and forcefully thrust his foot into her abdomen, stopping her forthwith in mid-stride. She yelped and bent over in agony, her intestines and abdominal muscles convalescing in knotted pain. She held her belly and sank to the floor. The pain in her stomach was unbearable. She feared the Caesarean operation she had on giving birth to Peza had yawned open. On her hunches, she keeled, expecting her midsection to redden with blood, but no blood appeared on her body.

Just then, she saw blood on the shards of glass on the floor, which brought a chill in her heart. Undoubtedly, it was her son's blood. Ignoring her pain, she lurched and grabbed Bomani's left leg in both arms. She was inches from sinking her teeth into his thigh, when a blow to the back of her head hit her like a sledgehammer, sending her sprawling face first to the floor.

Matipa smelled blood in her nostrils. Darkness rushed into her eyes and blanketed everything as she lost consciousness.

“In death you can choose in a way that you can’t choose in life. The biggest mistake you could make when you die is to be afraid.”

-Gary Gilmore, b 1940. (American murderer executed by firing squad in Utah in 1977)

Chapter 1

His brow puckered, Bomani Kumanda woke up in the night recalling his Catholic past. Recollections of Roman priests, archbishops and cardinals in their immaculate robes and skullcaps, the Vatican and its vaults, irritated him to the point of clenching his fists. Sentient he wasn't himself for over a decade now, he waited until his sight accustomed to the moonlight.

He was lying in a hovel pitched in a thicket. It was 7 December; eight days had passed since the day he took Peza hostage. Yawning, he rose and stepped completely naked out of the crude shelter, which looked like a nomadic shepherd's temporary refuge. Five other hovels similarly made from bundles of grass and multi-purpose plastic black sheets, together with his, surrounded a structure resembling a waist-high goat pen half the size of a ping-pong table.

The shelters, private quarters for each of his men, were low and open-ended on two sides. In them, each man slept and prayed to his ancestors and the gods of *Gule Wamkulu* for protection and immunity against arrest, and the arrival of Binga. The crudely garrisoned construction, a circular structure of thin sticks tied together with strips of bark to form a grass-thatched cage, held its sole captive, Peza. The hovels were in a circle with an approximate radius of seven metres. The camp in the thorny thicket was adjacent to thirteen graves.

Aside from the cries of nocturnal birds and crickets, the vicinity was quiet. Somewhere in the area, a sentinel was possibly watching him. Taking care to avoid outcrops and walking into thorny bushes, he crossed to the warren in the middle and looked down at the boy. Peza was motionless and snoring like his henchmen in their shelters. Satisfied the bait was secure in his custody; Bomani returned to his hovel and lay on a blanket, his mood meditative. His spirits and gods had never failed him. It was a question of time before they brought

Binga to him; otherwise, he would've to kill the boy and take his head to Sakis Mine as he had promised. When he pondered the capabilities of his spirits and gods, he ultimately focused on God, the apex of every spiritual matrix.

Yet he was extremely angry with God. When he thought of God, the Madonna, Jesus Christ, angels, and beautified saints, a burning charcoal glowed in his breast. God and His assembly of innumerable saints and legions of angels had failed him. He had banked his trust in the Lord, only to be humiliated, dejected and thrown out of His presence like a leper discovered in a synagogue.

Lying on the blanket sleepless, he reflected on his Catholic past, his haplessness and the canard of believing in God in the twenty-first century. The Bible needed rewriting, he ventured, especially where it stated God was the same yesterday, today and forever. Perhaps his anger was unreasonable because, after all, there were chances God had ceased to exist and the universe was freefalling to its destruction.

Bomani's life, beginning when he was in secondary school in rural Malawi, was a series of sad and unbelievable experiences. Now he was sure familiar spirits were in control everywhere, favouring those like him who recognised them. When he was a teenager afraid a curse had besieged him, he vainly set out to protect himself by converting to Protestant Christianity. Then he converted to what he deemed proper Christianity, Roman Catholicism. Fourteen years ago, by a streak of luck, he toured the Seven-hilled city at eighteen when he was a first-year seminarian at the St Joseph Catholic seminary in Thyolo, about fifty kilometres south of Blantyre in the Southern Province of Malawi.

The Vatican availed some funds to sponsor poor seminarians who wished to set their feet on the holy ground on which the relics of saints lay and God's representative on earth, the Pope, had his throne and residency. After writing some tests and attending many panel interviews, Bomani Kumanda met the criterion and was despatched to Rome.

In Rome, he met a dozen other seminarians from poor countries. The touring would-be priests, all males, chatted excitedly about their countries, exchanged addresses, and contact numbers. They welcomed him with hugs, kisses and utterances of blessings. Some gave him sweets and biscuits. In the whole of Malawi including the Roman Catholic seminary, he hadn't known that kind of love and concern.

The group consisted of Brazilians, Argentines, an Aborigine, Indonesians and fellow Africans. The brothers were twelve, and he was the thirteenth—thirteen aspiring Catholic priests on a sponsored pilgrimage to the Vatican, the earthly seat of God. An open deck, full catering hired bus drove them around.

While they enjoyed different steaming foods with strange names, they breathed the fresh air of Rome, gaped at its plains and mountainous scenery and ogled at the grandiose of the architecture of its old buildings standing in unending contrast to skyscrapers. A tour guide in ancestral Roman military armour, saddles, a sword in a scabbard and a plumed helmet, pointed at buildings, street-corner fountains, and gigantic marble statues of men, horses and lions displaying genitalia, gusto and muscles, giving off the cuff lectures on their architects and sculptors. The names of Caesars and Popes took precedence. The guide talked about the Renaissance and Italy's unique architecture, the names Michelangelo Amerighi da Caravaggio, Picasso, Giorgio de Chirico, Leonardo da Vinci and many others punctuating his presentation.

Towards dusk, they cruised past the iridescent Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome as it lit and brightened the night-darkened waters of the Tiber River, casting the reflection of its glowing grandeur on it. At nightfall, the bus took them to a hotel near the magnificent ruins of a second century chateau. The guide emphasised they had to sleep and get ready to see the Vatican and its living tourist attractions, the Cardinals, and if they were lucky, the Pope, the following day. Belching onion, salad cream and mushrooms, Bomani had gone to

bed the words of the guide ringing in his head: “The best is yet to be seen, brothers.”

The next morning, after a scrumptious breakfast of percolated coffee, cracking hot sausages, oats, omelettes, bacon, deep-fried mozzarella cheese and whole-wheat bread, the bus set out for the Vatican. As the bus drove into the State, unique architecture stared at them from all directions. Ahead was vast St. Peter’s, the largest of all churches as it dwarfed and dominated the Vatican. To the right of St. Peter’s dome the guide pointed at the peaked-roof of the Sistine Chapel. St. Peter’s Square was a great open space framed with massive colonnades. The guide pointed at the papal apartments on the topmost floor of a storied building to their right. On the colonnades, nude statues stared down at them.

On alighting from the bus, two Cardinals from the Curia welcomed and handed them over to an official guide of the Vatican, an Italian middle-aged man in a sleek olive three-piece suit, beige necktie and matching shoes. The man bore himself stately.

“My name is Filippo,” the new guide introduced himself, “Brother Filippo.” He shook hands with all the brothers, slightly bowing and nodding his acquaintance of the individuals as he stared in each and everyone’s face and spoke with a pride surpassing whoever deemed themselves the proprietors of the buildings.

Bomani found the Italian’s palm as soft as organdie, and thought Filippo appraised him more than he did the others. Filippo babbled about sculptors and architects, proudly pronouncing a string of names from Donato d’Agnolo to Michelangelo and stating the dates the great men brought historic facelifts to the buildings. Before frescoes, he saluted Paolo Uccello, Fra Filippo Lippi, Pietro Vannucci Perugino, Raffaello Sanzio and repeatedly Buonarroti Michelangelo.

The group toured the lower Vatican grottoes beneath St. Peter’s, mausoleums of early Christians, some dating back to the second century. Among them, by tradition, were the relics of Apostle Peter himself. When they stood at the vault housing the saint’s remains,

Filippo became so reverent that he spoke in low tones with one hand on his breast, as if he was afraid to wake the first envisaged pope.

Standing at the tomb, Bomani resolved to be more Catholic than ever, to repeat the Lord's Prayer innumerably everyday and to make the rosary his companion. After five years, he would be ordained priest in Malawi and despatched to a diocese most likely rural. He quietly promised God he would continue to study and strive to be morally upright, as he had always striven at the seminary, for elevation to the office of bishop and subsequently archbishop. He intended to ascend the Catholic hierarchy to become Monsignor Bomani, then a cardinal and finally be elevated to Pope Africanus I, the first black pope and black resident of Castel Gandolfo.

At the tomb, he imagined himself in papal regalia in the Pontiff's glass-panelled bulletproof vehicle, smiling and waving at seas of African, Asian and European faces welcoming him into sports stadia and public squares. He saw cardinals kneeling to kiss his ring, and himself standing on St. Peter's balcony, haranguing the world to desist from abortion and contraceptives and appealing to the Taliban to lay down arms.

Brother Filippo took them to the visitor's refreshing quarters at the back of the Vatican and thanked them for being good listeners; assuring them no one visited the Vatican and remained the same. Bomani had hoped to see the Pope and shake his hand, but the Pontiff was in a series of meetings with Cardinals of the Curia.

That evening, as he lay in his hotel bed and stared at the suite's ceiling, he faced the reality he had shunned for many years. He hadn't converted to Roman Catholicism for any other reason but his fear of *Gule Wamkulu* spirits. His father, Cholooka Bomani, had been dead for about eleven months when he flew to Rome, but every night he dreamt of the dead man chasing him despite his imminent priesthood. Cholooka chased him through a cathedral, thickets, desert plains and graveyards, until both men were naked and ashen,

and *gule* drumbeat muffled their footsteps and panting, and Lake Malawi barricaded Bomani from further flight.

Chapter 2

At 9:05 pm on 7 December, Nomathemba handed a ten-dollar note to a cabdriver and asked him to keep the change. A porter opening the door for her, she stepped out self-consciously, one high-heeled foot charmingly after the other like a Hollywood celebrity arriving at an Oscar presentation ceremony; except the arrivals bay was dim and deserted save for two porters and a security guard, a Goliath of a man, in a dark suit and glasses. With an American of impeccable tastes desiring her company, she felt very important.

The porters smiled at her, greeted her warmly and politely waved her to the foyer's entrance. Gently swinging a handbag, she walked into the hotel as confidently as possible, just like any other patron with legitimate business at the hotel. Though the chances were slim, she was afraid of coming across people who knew her, especially her neighbours, who could inform her husband of her moonlighting. If it ever reached him, she feared he would give her a thorough beating and divorce her.

In dark glasses, a faded blue denim jacket, a hugging chiffon top and a pair of black leggings, she knew observers could easily label her a prostitute, which she was remotely in all honesty. The police could arrest her for *loitering for purposes of prostitution* if she stood at any street corner, but intimacy was about impressions and stimulation. Nicolson had to lose his senses on setting his eyes on her. Though ever since she went on her escapades the police had never arrested her, she had seen on several occasions a number of unfortunate prostitutes rounded up, flogged on the buttocks with truncheons or forced into police vans. If the police arrested her, it would eventually reach Binga and enrage him. Though she wasn't sure how he would react, he seemed the type of man who could follow her to jail and

murder her there, after which he would commit suicide to pursue her in Hell.

A number of things were disconcerting about Binga Jochoma. Most disturbing was his inexplicable absence from home. Secondly, his silence on exactly what occupied him when he was away from her. Thirdly, his lame excuses for not buying a cell phone. Fourthly, the endless nightmares he experienced almost every night. Not that he told her he was experiencing terrible dreams, but she could tell from the jerks and the yells he made in his sleep. One night he sat up suddenly, waking her, and sleepily spoke to one Peza while harshly admonishing one Matipa not to interfere when he was speaking to the former. In the morning, she had asked him who Peza and Matipa were.

The names appeared to frighten and perplex him. He repeated them thoughtfully, shook his head and demanded to know where she had heard them as if they were talking about her boyfriends. Binga calmed when she told him of his latest nightmare. Only then, did he smile and tell her the names were products of a dreamy world.

Nomathemba sauntered past the reception counter of Churchill Arms Hotel. About half a dozen guests with travelling bags and suitcases busied two uniformed women and a man behind the counter who took no notice of her. The hotel's thick green carpet muffling her footsteps, she walked along a deserted narrow passage until she turned and stood before suite 110, and knocked.

The door opened, almost immediately. A thick, hairy white hand reached out and pulled her in. She wanted to say "Hello", but the man gave her no chance; he was already kissing her and reaching between her legs. She gasped and closed her eyes. One hand held her fundament and the other slid into her leggings. The handbag fell from her hand. She mewed, a sound that said she was game to his bulldog pugnacity and meant to urge him. This was what she craved except he was solitary when the service required a mob.

He turned her around, his wet lips brushing her ear and coming to rest at her nape for a few seconds. "You're very obedient, Emilia." He said in his strange accent.

"You said no underpants, sir. I'm at your service."

He turned her to face him. She opened her eyes and stared into his handsome face. The man was about forty years old, meticulous with his looks. He was in denim trousers stylishly torn in one knee, and shirtless. His upper body had all sorts of tattoos, from cobras, bats, skulls, flowers and initials to symbols of the horoscope. Sometime in March that year he had called her on the phone and excitedly informed her he had won a consolation prize during the International Tattoo Show in Buenos Aires, an exhibition he said drew participants from as far as Argentina, Spain, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Mexico and the United States of America.

She pressed a hand against his crotch. "This is very promising, Nico," she said, shivering, a fire already building inside her. Placing her hands on his shoulders, she began to caress his deltoid muscles and arms.

He had the stolid, compact body of a weightlifter, a narrow waistline, defined abdominal muscles and a barrel chest. He smiled and held the waistband of her leggings with both hands. "Two long years," he mourned. "How do we say hello to each other?"

She wiped saliva from the corners of his lips. "I don't know, Nico. You tell me."

From a hip pocket, he drew a wallet bustling with hundred-dollar banknotes. Leaf by leaf he took out five bills and slid them in her brassiere, and sighed in exhilaration. "Five hundred US dollars... yours to squander in these extraordinary times of scarcity in a country endowed with diamonds and platinum. Open your mouth."

She did.

He spat into her mouth. "That's how the gypsies tame their dogs."

She fought back expressing repulsion, and shedding despairing tears of self-pity. If it registered on her face, it could spoil what was in store for her. For silver and gold, he was abusing her.

“Tonight you’ll call me Herr Goeth or Commandant Goeth.”

“Yes, Commandant Goeth,” she said in mock seriousness, happy this was the prelude to some interesting phantasmagorical sexual game.

He grinned, toying with the waistband of her leggings. Suddenly he ripped it apart.

“Nicolson, what’re you doing? I don’t have spare clothes.”

“Imagine how life could’ve been interesting if man hadn’t thought of clothes. God saw it proper that man shouldn’t wear clothes, the reason Adam and Eve were created without them.”

“But I suppose we should keep God’s name out of all this.”

“God isn’t a name. God is the words we speak, the things we see, the life we live...all our daily experiences. Be smarter than that, girl.”

She wanted to remonstrate he was taking it too far, but he lifted and threw her on the bed, something impersonal in his face, grip and the manner he flung her. She landed almost head first. He fell on her, like a tiger for the kill, and began tearing off her clothes. The banknotes flew from her brassiere.

She sensed something terribly wrong with him. Nicolson wasn’t himself, and this apparently was beyond sadomasochism. It had no other definition besides rape. Scared of what he would do to her after the act, she opened her mouth to scream, but he had a handkerchief ready, which he shoved into her mouth. Pressing her neck down with his knee, he sealed her mouth with a wide adhesive tape. The grin on his face was sardonic.

Chapter 3

Because in the afternoon a technician took apart some components of the gold mill for maintenance work in the interim as terror reigned, the night was quiet aside from the cries of birds, especially owls. However, the community perceived the continued hooting of owls as an evil omen.

Matipa lay in bed staring at the roof of their bedroom, wishing she were dead and six feet underground in that position. Dead, she would be incapable of worrying about Peza and seeing scary images of Bomani in her mind as she imagined him persecuting Peza relentlessly. The demon had talked about Sodom and Gomorrah. Her heart sunk whenever it crossed her mind the horde could be molesting her son. Vulgar images of Bomani and his team abusing Peza wrenched her heart. Her solace came from the possibility the brute had long killed her son.

As she lay in bed, she discerned digging or ramming noises akin to one man working the ground near the compound. The noise was stronger when the wind became northerly. Whoever it was worked like an automaton. She was certain it was coming from the direction of the obelisk and the cemetery. The person had been at it for slightly over an hour now, having started his mysterious work at about 8 pm. Who could it be? No one in the compound worked late into the night on personal tasks. Besides, the northern side of the compound had nothing apart from the obelisk and the cemetery in a bushy veldt. To calm her inquisitive mind, she settled for the supposition it was perhaps an illegal gold digger working on an exposed seam.

She resorted to pondering her changed circumstances, her sorrow and untold predicament. Matipa would've appreciated it if Bomani Kumanda had kidnapped her, instead of her son. She refrained from rueing the day she was born, which was blasphemous. Although at one point she had remotely cursed God and had shaken with an

appalling resentment of the Creator, she consoled herself with the notion that blaming her misfortune on God was a natural reaction. She took it the All-knowing had forgiven her. The Almighty knew she had despised Him under unbearable distress and frustration.

Sleep evaded Matipa. She saw Peza's face on the corrugated sheets, on the naked bulb, on the walls, everywhere. Twice in the morning that day, she thought she heard his voice outside. Twice she opened the door to investigate the reality of her perception, only to turn back in frustration after discovering it wasn't he but some boy passing or playing near their house. The image of Bomani pulling Peza back into the bedroom and attacking him ruthlessly tormented her. Again, she visualised him in the hands of Bomani, but as before, she thwarted the thoughts by accepting Peza's death. Repeatedly, she told herself he was dead, that his body, perhaps decapitated and mutilated, lay desolate somewhere. Though concluding he was dead hurt so much that the pain palpably knotted her abdominal muscles, it somewhat soothed her that her son was beyond agony.

This being 7 December, eight days had lapsed since the prophesied demon kidnapped her son. Christmas Day, eviction day, edged closer. Yet she guessed by 25 December, Akar would've returned. The longest he had been away was about a month. The demon in human form had promised to return. Her prayer was that Bomani's return would coincide with Akar's, or at least the evil one would find her husband home.

The more she thought of her husband and where he could be, the more she chased sleep from her eyes. Her thoughts reverted on her son, from the day he was born and his first cry. She saw him crawling and learning to walk. She saw him waddling to her for protection when he felt threatened. As Peza grew up, bright and energetic, she had envisioned him excelling in soccer and at school. Often, she dreamed of him grown up and playing football for European clubs. Other times she saw him excelling academically to the point of receiving accolades and bursaries. In her imagination, he grew into a

responsible and notable man married to a God-fearing pretty woman. However, 29 November turned everything upside down.

She hoped her husband would return sometime soon and there would be vengeance. He would know where to find the devil and fold him sixteen times like a napkin, but no magnitude of revenge could bring Peza back. At least she would learn from her husband why Bomani thought he was Binga and why it befitted the heartless man of memorable etiquette to kidnap an innocent child and set on fire someone in religious garments.

After successfully begging sympathizers to stop the funeral wake-like vigils at her house, and consoling her like one bereaved, Matipa feared the morphing emerges of her son and the hallucinations were signs of a morbid depression that would lead to insanity. She feared ending up running naked alongside the charlatan whose madness was still standing and topical.

The police had vainly vowed to find Bomani and Peza, dead or alive, within a few days. Now eight days after the kidnapping, the case was dying a natural death. She couldn't help concluding nothing tangible would come from the police.

Now that she was in bed and alone, Matipa went through the occurrence that left the compound dwellers further stunned beginning at midday: Emedhi's alleged ossification. Was it possible for a man's flesh to turn into bone suddenly? By sending the orderly to the hospital in his place, had the mill manager suspected the occurrence of such an oddity and avoided ossifying? If indeed it were an irreversible condition as Mr Gilchrist Keneas had indicated, would the mine compensate the illiterate man?

Sleep continued to evade her for some time, but without warning, whisked her away. She dreamt chasing Bomani Kumanda's silhouette:

Bomani's shadow was fleeing with Peza through thorny thickets in an uninhabited nightmarish landscape that did the kidnapper no harm, but tore away clothing and flesh from her son. Its strides and leaps quantum, the silhouette

was endowed with the speed of lightening and the evasiveness of a snake. Yet she was equally faster and serpentine. In the sky, a full moon provided enough light for her to avoid concrete structures jutting from the ground, which she later figured were tombstones, mounds of earth and piled stones denoting graves. Peza was motionless in the demon's arms. If she could catch up with them, she would be able to tell if her son was alive or dead. She wanted to look at Peza's face. If he were dead, the chase was pointless.

Suddenly her legs felt like lead. She laboured to run and the distance between them widened. In desperation, she called out for help, but her voice echoed in all directions, and dry laughter emanated from the graves. A solitary figure loomed ahead of the silhouette. It had to be Akar; she could tell from his clothes, height and build. Her husband, the terror of Sakis Mine and the gold claims beyond, had his peculiar homemade small axe in his hand, together with its mediumistic cloth and beads. Her husband would stop the demon and rescue their son. However, Akar stepped aside and let the kidnapper pass. Dropping the axe, he sat on a cairn and put his head between his knees. Bomani stopped, looked over his shoulder and turned. Only then, did she realise that only the torso was in silhouette; the face had clear features. She dragged her feet past Akar and scuffled towards Bomani.

When she passed her husband, she realised all along she hadn't been chasing Bomani, the prophesied demon that kidnapped Peza. The man fleeing with Peza was Madzibaba Jatrophba. She couldn't see Peza's face; a towering tombstone cast a shadow on her son's face. She edged closer, extending her hand for the boy. The noise of crowing cocks reached her. When she was a few paces from the two, the tombstone slowly tumbled towards Madzibaba Jatrophba and her son, threatening to crush Peza and the prophet.

Matipa screamed and woke up to the noise of crowing cocks in the compound. The distant clocking of a pick was gone. The crowing became intermittent before finally dying. A cheerless orchestra of hooting owls infringed with the cries of other birds and cicadas that occasionally raised the tempo took over. Apart from the natural cries, the night was quiet.

She pondered the dream and quickly dismissed it as meaningless and stemming from her own fear. She had gone to sleep with Bomani, Peza and Jatropa on her mind, and she had dreamt of them. Prayer that moved mountains was pertinent now. Only God could deliver her from her predicament.

The naked bulb in the bedroom was still on. A quartz clock on the wall indicated it was midnight, a special time for prayer. Years of apostolic worship had engendered it in her to pray without ceasing. Whenever humanly possible, she bowed in supplication after every three hours starting at midnight. Tonight she wouldn't call upon or worship angels as stipulated by the faith she was renouncing. She would look at Christ and cry to God, and she wouldn't do it in the accursed white garments that brought darkness in her life.

Of all the people who came to console her, Ivy, the secretary-cum-receptionist, was the only one bold enough to beg and advise her to reject her apostolic faith and reverence of Baba Johannes, a mortal man who died in 1973. Ivy urged her to return to the proper fold of God's children. Coming from a suspected fornicator, the words had shocked her though Ivy had sounded sincere.

As she climbed out of bed in an old T-shirt and a long nylon skirt to kneel down in prayer and send petitions to God for the recovery of her son's body and the urgent return of her husband, approaching footsteps stopped her in mid-action. They were heavy and threatening, the sound of boots crushing pebbles. The walker was steady and slow. About three metres from her threshold the footsteps stopped abruptly. A loud noise startled her as something hit the main door. The object landed with the crushing sound of a shattering gourd.

Matipa trembled. *No weapon fashioned against me shall prosper.*

The footsteps came again, but they were fading in the direction they came.

Who was outside? What did he throw at her door? Could it be Peza's remains? Perhaps it was her son critically injured and in need of medical help.

She wanted to step outside and investigate, but caution checked her; danger lurked in the dark. She could easily meet with her death. The walker had the thuds of a giant. Someone was out there waiting for her to make a grave blunder. Frozen, she listened. The footsteps vanished northwards, the direction of the obelisk and the cemetery. Under the obelisk lay the eighteen illegal dead miners. In the cemetery were old and recent graves. Both sites were potential habitats for ghosts.

Part of her mind was convinced a ghost had visited her, found her bedroom light on and cast something at their house in frustration. Another part of her mind dismissed it as nonsense. By what mechanism could a ghoul hurl something physical?

She resolved to pray, scared whatever was lurking outside would lose patience and return to tear apart her house and kill her. Believing mid-night prayers were extraordinarily powerful, she meditated briefly about Apostle Paul and Silas when they were incarcerated but stood up to pray and praise God at that hour, which caused their prison's foundation to shake and pried open the doors. *God is the same yesterday, today and forever*, she pondered and knelt on the bedside. She was about to clasp her hands in humility when a northern voice tore the night's tranquillity. The voice was cathedral and unmistakably familiar, the indisputable voice of Bomani Kumanda.

"If you'd offered your menstrual blood," the voice broadcast like a priest preaching to a packed stadium, "Bomani would've made it easy for you, madam! Bomani said he could do with your menstrual blood! Had you given Bomani a stain to lick, Bomani would've taken his leave!"

Matipa's bowels grumbled.

Another voice, southerly and about fifty metres from her house concurred. The second voice was a replica of the first: "Leviticus says

the life of the flesh is in the blood! Terrible times have come! This place shall not know peace until Binga presents himself to Bomani! If you don't yield Binga, no one shall escape Bomani's wrath! Bomani speaks misery and fear into the life of every listener!"

The two speakers were about hundred metres from each other. The similarity and the familiarity struck her like the crows of a male and a female black mamba calling each other in courtship, a reptilian foreplay no man had ever stood.

The first voice came again. "Bomani declared bloodshed and mayhem! The crows are gathering! If you can hear me, this night is your worst nightmare!"

Could Bomani be in two places at once? It was impossible. Yet Matipa wasn't dreaming and her senses weren't playing tricks with her. What seemed to explain it was that either ghosts or goblins were harassing her.

Immediately the second voice took over. "Bomani doesn't utter empty threats! If anyone is brave and can hear Bomani, step outside! Come and see what Death looks like! Come and see his faceless face! Tree stumps shall bleed sap! In the meantime let us get acquainted!"

Matipa knew the calibre of people obtaining was cowardly. No one was going to confront the speakers or venture out to verify if indeed one of them was Bomani. No one was going to establish the strange phenomenon he was employing to speak in two places at once. She wished Akar were home, the only person who could've stepped outside.

Again, the first voice came, but it was no longer stationary. It was growing louder, apparently moving towards her house. "It was Bomani's word Peza would be in good hands for a few days; after which he could be returned to his mother and to all of you to describe for the rest of his life the pleasures and pains of Sodom and Gomorrah, which was one option!"

A brief silence followed. The nocturnal cries silenced at the onset of the intrigue rendered the quietness unsettling.

No one could save anyone in a petrified compound, she reasoned standing up. This was the third sequel to an evil drama. The first was the kidnapping of Peza that saw Remegio set on fire alive. The second was Remegio's death and the return that morning of Mr Emedhi dump and stony. What was going to stop this realistic malevolent tragedy?

Though she had latched and locked the main door, she understood the weather-beaten plywood affair wouldn't stand the strength or weight of whatever had approached her house. The inner door's padlock was missing and its improvised latching mechanism broken. The main door required urgent fortification. She would pile everything movable and heavy against it to hold back the problem until daybreak. She looked at the wardrobe. It was laden with packed suitcases, a broken bicycle and large cardboard boxes full to the brim with junk. The unit, about seven metres from the main door, couldn't be moved an inch by an ordinary woman.

She went into the lounge-cum-kitchen, switched on the light to see if she could move anything in it, her eyes quickly falling on the 21-inch TV set, its tubular stand, the sofas and the homemade two-tiered wooden tray bearing dinner plates, pots and utensils. In no time, she was pushing a two-seater sofa across the floor towards the main door. When she was positioning it against the door, its back to it, the second voice came again. She stopped to listen, stooped, her hands on the sofa. Like the first, this speaker too was moving towards her house.

"The other option was macabre! Only Bomani's patience holds it at bay! It remains open for Bomani to shred Peza into thin ribbons and wear him like a mayoral medal! Of course, you won't have to bury the head of a goat in lieu of your son's body! Bomani'll bring his skull to you for a dignified burial! Bomani knows no pain surpasses the agony of knowing a dear one lays dead and unburied somewhere!"

When the voice stopped, she guessed the speakers were about twenty metres from each other and a few metres from her house. Then the heavy footsteps came again, deliberately slow and intimidating. Panicking, she saw there was no time for her to pile things against the door, yet a contingency measure was imperative. She dashed into the bedroom. She would move the seemingly immovable wardrobe to barricade the inner door. Should the mystery break down the outer door, the inner backed by the laden unit, would stop it for a considerable time until help arrived. She was going to scream her lungs out.

With all her strength she tried to push the wardrobe, her face grimacing, eyes closed tightly. Veins stood out on the back of her hands and on her forearms. It didn't move. She turned and tried to move it with her back. The effort was vain, but she kept at it, sobbing.

"Now that Bomani has reiterated his concerns and is about to take his leave," the voice said on the threshold, "offer any measure of your menstrual blood to appease his anger in the interim!"

The speaker was directly addressing her, which sent a shiver down her spine, the absurd request baffling her. What did he intend to do with her menses? Many women died from ceaseless menstruation after witches tempered with their discharges. She looked about. Her eyes rested on the bed. She would block the inner door with it and pile whatever was portable on it.

"Rest assured; madam, when the time comes, Binga'll know where to find Bomani!"

Grabbing the bed with both hands, she pulled it towards the door. After pulling and pushing, she properly positioned it against the closed door. Now she needed to add weight onto the bed. The load on the wardrobe would do perfectly.

When she was crossing to the burdened unit, something on the dusty spot where the bed had been caught her attention. Her eyes narrowed as she stopped in mid-stride and looked at the two clay

bowls *Madzibaba* Jatropha inscribed the names *Gillian* and *Nomathemba*, one in each. Jatropha's melodramatic voice rang in her head as she recalled his words: *"Take the vessels home and keep them inverted in a safe place. If you really need your husband to return so that you may take your leave, shatter them on the floor or on rocks. You may do so tonight if your heart says so."*

Rage shaking her hands, she picked the bowls and scrutinised them, her countenance contemptuous. As before, the two names rang nothing in her mind. She clicked her tongue and slammed the bowls on the floor. One shattered, but the other landed on a shoe, bounced and went on to land on a large vestige of the smashed one, and spurn away from her on its axis amid earthen shards. As she stood amid the litter, silently cursing Jatropha and the things he represented, the other vessel spinning, it occurred to her she needed to burn all her apostolic apparels and throw away all the so-called "consecrated stones" she received from the bogus prophet. When the bowl came to rest, she picked it and read the name inside:

GILLIAN

Perhaps there was need to spare one bowl as evidence to confront her husband with upon his return. It might be interesting to see his reaction and hear his comment. Outside danger continued to lurk. Seeing the importance of not being distracted for too long, she shelved the vessel amid clothes in the wardrobe unit. Then she reached for a suitcase on the unit. When she pulled it, many things including the bicycle, came down on her like an avalanche, knocking her to the floor. She screamed as she fell.

She was grunting and fingering her sides, attempting to rise, when the voice came again from the threshold. "Now that you know Bomani comes like a thief, in future keep his ambrosia ready!" The footsteps came again, but they were fading. The speaker was going

away. “As the sun rises tomorrow, the compound shall grieve over those it moaned in the past!”

She was relieved; the worst seemed over.

“Tell Binga to bring a spot-free black hen! Bomani hopes it isn’t too much to remember! Should he come with the police or any other company, Peza won’t have time to receive his last rites!” The voice diminished with the footsteps, but the speaker’s vocal vein wasn’t exhausted. The threats persisted as the voice went round the house. “Bomani’ll slaughter both father and son! Vultures and jackals will devour them and scatter their bones! From that day until the day you die, madam, you’ll not know sorrow more agonising!”

Matipa’s head, left shoulder and legs hurt. She struggled to her feet and went to the room’s solitary back window, the one that nearly saw Peza escape. Hesitantly, she parted the curtain a little and peered out in time to see a moonlit figure of a man passing in the shadow of a tree, his back to her. From his lethargic gait, it was clear he was the speaker, and this speaker definitely wasn’t Bomani. The man was slightly stooped, barefoot and elderly. He was in striped hospital garbs and carried a pick and a shovel on his right shoulder.

When he passed the tree, she noticed an adhesive bandage on the back of his head. He walked awkwardly. A couple of metres beyond the tree, he stood drenched in moonlight and turned, as if to look at the house in farewell. Many things distinguished the man, but when she stared in his bland face, coldness settled in her heart as she learnt beyond doubt her tormentor was none other than Evans Emedhi.

What was happening? She blinked several times in disbelief, vainly hoping to lend logic to the inexplicable occurrence, and to see if she was still rooted in a world of her understanding. Could some kind of dementia have stricken her? Mr Emedhi stared at the window, motionless as a human-size marble statue carrying digging tools on its shoulder.

“Wait till morning, everybody!” It wasn’t Emedhi speaking, she could see him. The cryptic voice came from the front of the house. “At daybreak you’ll walk on cobbled footpaths!”

Staring at Emedhi, she wondered who the other speaker was and what he meant. Was what she was hearing also in the full perception of the rest of the compound? The moon gradually slid behind dark, nebulous clouds, initially reducing Emedhi to a silhouette, which finally blended with the darkness.

Chapter 4

Nomathemba had been lying on her back for many hours now, resigned to Nicolson. Strangely, he had placed a translucent sheet beneath her that overlapped the bed. She knew him as a man who didn't care whether they soiled the bedding or not. To her knowledge, he had never cared for anything except perverted intimacy and sadism. The adhesive tape stopped her from asking him questions.

With a large Nazi banner, a black swastika on a red mural, on one wall, and the portrait of Adolf Hitler on the opposite, the atmosphere in the hotel room was ominous. Mindful she could be in the hands of a maniac, she guarded against showing fear and fuelling his madness.

Nicolson, in Germany's Second World War SS kepi tunic complete with an officer's rank insignia, the Golden Honour Badge of the Nazi Party, polished leather breeches, a red armband with a black swastika emblem in a white circle and a decorated military cap, brown shirt and navy-blue tie, was crouched between her spread legs. The man's appearance was awkward and devilish. He had no trousers on.

Despite her fear, she couldn't help thinking he was the resurrection of a maniacal SS officer taking a break from limbo to extinguish her sexual fires. The Lord was her shepherd; He gave her what she craved.

While at it, he started to shed the uniform, starting with the cap, which he threw away. He undid the tie and the breeches. The items followed the cap on the floor. Then he fumbled with the tunic. He was skilled at it, like some magician performing some tricks, the clothing items flying from him to the floor in all directions until he was in polished calf-high boots only. His naked body glistened with sweat. He had the physique of a professional athlete, knotted

abdominal muscles, a Herculean chest, outstanding biceps and muscular legs.

The headless figurine, rocking and shifting next to open packets of *Viagra* and Methamphetamine tablets on the headboard, seemed to sanction and oversee everything on the bed. Ever since she arrived, the abstract curving had overlooked acts of unparalleled voyeurism, experiments with champagne bottles and smacking that drew tears in Nomathemba's eyes. He performed many nature-defying, demeaning and dehumanising fantasies without her consent. His aim appeared to hurt; though this far, he hadn't really hurt her. She felt like crying before things got out of hand, to let him know she was no longer comfortable and would rather stop, but the handkerchief in her mouth and the adhesive gagged her from crying aloud.

When tears welled in her eyes, he stopped, like one coming to his senses. Perhaps bogus sympathy was part of the rituals. Wordlessly, he wiped tears from her eyes, kissed the adhesive tape covering her mouth, sat in a bedside chair and removed his military boots. Then he crossed to the closet, stepping over the clothes on the floor. She heard him fumbling with the clothing inside. After a while, he emerged in a plain white T-shirt and the jean trousers torn in one knee. Going round the bed, he checked every strap, making sure the straps weren't yielding. Then he left the suite.

She guessed he went to the hotel bar for a few drinks, but he was doing it mutely, which was unlike him. If it was all part of the act, then Hollywood superstars had better watch out, he was good. She was very scared, something she couldn't continue to deny to herself. Later on, he returned, visibly tipsy and smelling of beer. He carried a wooden container packed with ice cubes, and headed to a refrigerator in a corner of the room. Opening the refrigerator, he placed the ice inside it.

By jerking her head in the direction of the en suite toilet, she vainly begged him to unbind her so that she could relieve herself. He

etched two water glasses and placed one between her legs. Though he had degraded her, she felt sadistic games were one thing, calls of nature another. It was downright undignified for her to relieve herself while he was looking. She shook her head.

He pressed an area slightly above her mound, and urine poured into the glass as he massaged the spot. She ascertained he had an intimate understanding of human biology. Chances were he wasn't what he said he was a sculptor. He was probably a medical doctor, perhaps a surgeon, not a Roman cardinal masquerading as a sculptor on vacation.

Her urine filled the two glasses off. He placed them on the small table and vanished briefly behind the closet, whose doors he opened. When he returned, he was whistling tunelessly and tearing open two flat sachets, which turned out to be pregnancy test kits. Carefully, still whistling, he stooped over the glassfuls of urine and partially immersed strips from the kits, one in each glass for about three seconds. He placed the strips on the table and didn't take his eyes off them. She noticed he was nervous as if his or her life depended on the results.

She wondered why he was testing her for pregnancy. Everything was absurd.

After five minutes, he nodded gratefully, stopped whistling and smiled. "The results are encouraging, Emilia."

He started calmly, which relieved her. Because he said her bogus name, she took it he was still himself.

"You're not pregnant. But I know you want to know why I'm going these lengths."

She nodded.

"You'll soon know, Emilia. Without mystery, life becomes awful."

She wanted him to say more, to demystify his strange actions, but he sat in the chair and seemed to scan her inch by inch with his eyes.

“God instructed Jewish priests not to accept defective rams or allow cripples into Synagogues,” he said. “Even nature has its way of selection. Men with certain diseases and cancers have a low sperm count and are usually sterile. It’s amusing, isn’t it?”

Because it was dangerous to exhibit fear, she just stared at him. The clock on the wall said it was 1:07 am. As he sat in the chair, she noticed he was sweating on the brow, shuddering and twitching. He fingered his nose and felt his neck, his face contorting. Something was agonising him. Sneezing bouts seized him.

He stood up, still sneezing, picked the packet of Methamphetamine tablets and drew a number. He cast the tablets into his mouth and swallowed them without water, his angular larynx going up then down as confirmation. It was a hard feat, but one that betrayed him as a habitual consumer of the tablets. “Mixing business with pleasure is one of my weaknesses,” he said with the same calmness as before. “When I called you yesterday I didn’t have business in mind. I told myself should business cross my mind, I’d brush it off.”

What was he talking about? Was he not secretly filming everything? Frantically, she vainly looked about for concealed cameras.

“I lied to myself, Emilia. Lying to oneself is more painful than having someone lie to you. It’s like finding yourself masturbating when you want to kick the habit.” He laughed good-naturedly, rose from the chair and looked at her. “You’re a mess, a real mess. I’ll clean you good when I’m appropriately dressed. You’ll excuse me, Emilia.”

She watched him vanish behind the corner with the closet. He opened the doors and returned immediately with two more buckled leather straps like the one fastening her arms to the bed.

“For the final act, the time of your life so to speak, your legs must be secured,” he said kneeling and grabbing her left ankle. He strapped it as his other hand reached for a hind leg of the bed. He

went round the bed and repeated the action, spread-eagling her on the bed. She told herself not to resist; resistance was a sign of fear. If he were a serial killer who delighted in seeing terror in the victim's eyes, she wouldn't propel him to the next stage by displaying it. She wanted to meet his eyes squarely in defiance, but blinked or looked away every time his eyes bore into hers.

"Now I must dress accordingly, if you don't mind." Again, he left her for the closet and spoke to her out of sight as he flung the doors open. "I suppose naturally you're keen to know what's in the closet. I'll tell you what I've in here. Suitcases... empty suitcases for that matter, if we're to discount empty plastic bags and a chopper in them."

She heard him fumbling with something plastic.

Now in light green surgical clothes; a theatre mask, a loose-fitting V-necked top and matching elastic pants, rubber gloves and flat shoes, he emerged wheeling two large suitcases. A stethoscope hung around his neck. "I don't know what jumped into me, Emilia. As I said, I didn't plan this. If I'd planned it, then on our first encounter, I would've drawn many samples from you to be sure, a whole lot of them... oral epithelium, stool and sputum besides the blood I drew from you initially. I must say the sample gave us good results. Your blood group is O negative. Though you've a voluminous appetite for sex, it shocked me to learn you were HIV-negative." He grinned. "You could be among the small percentage of people in the world that can't contract the virus because of the absence of a certain protein prerequisite. I reckon you're still negative though the network will conduct more tests in Berlin. I'll try to be as professional as possible and cause little pain." He spoke, placing the suitcases at the foot of the bed. He wore the earplugs of the stethoscope, stooped over her and placed the receptive end of the instrument on her chest, shifting it expertly until it was slightly to the left of her sternum just below her breast. "Try to relax. You can relive your first kiss."

It was an impossible suggestion. From his demeanour, she was sure he would kill her.

Head bent at an angle, he listened intently to her heartbeat for some seconds and stood erect, removing the plugs from his ears. “Your heart beats like an athlete’s. If your brain were as sound as your heart, you definitely wouldn’t be lying on your deathbed. Would you believe you’re about to say goodbye to this world?”

He returned to the obscured closet and came back with a small metal case, like a flat briefcase, and a small autoclave marked “UV Sterilisation”. The autoclave was a small metal compartment with a glass panel she had often seen in barbershops. He placed the metal case and the autoclave on the table and immediately plugged the latter into a wall socket and switched it on. The glass panel lit up, exhibiting a deep purplish colour. The wire mesh tray in the compartment held nothing.

He opened the case. She noticed it was a special container for surgical instruments; a scalpel, blades and scissors of various sizes and shapes, tong-like instruments and others she didn’t know. He pressed a button on the autoclave, the purplish light vanished and its door slide open downwards.

One by one, he placed the instruments on the tray, speaking casually as he did so: “Who’s Nicolson, you may be asking, naturally, of course.” He laughed dryly, briefly. “Nicolson is a pseudonym, obviously. The person whose expertise you’re about to experience is Dr Wilhelm Heinrich Goeth, grandson to SS Hauptsturmführer Amon Goeth. If you thought for one second I was in love with you, you were eternally wrong.”

She was dumbfounded.

“Lust can dehumanise a gentleman, exactly why I compromised my self-esteem by sleeping with an indigenous African.”

This wasn’t a game anymore. She looked at him with new eyes. Maybe she was wrong; there was nothing conclusive so far.

“Nazism is far from a castrated giant. For as long as there’s life under the sun, there shall be Nazis and millions of their supporters and sympathizers. Poets say evil breeds itself. As it is, I’ve three sons. They worship nothing but the Aryan blood in their veins.”

There was no doubt in her mind he was a demented atheist.

“I’m hopeful Germany’s future generations shall wake from their slumber and see the heroism and statesmanship of Adolf Hitler and the patriotism of Amon Goeth, and incorporate their names in the National Anthem. I’m talking about life after the demise of the United Nations, NATO and the European Union. ”

Nomathemba’s teeth gnashed loudly. She feared him and everything he represented. For her deliverance, she prayed, counter-productive voices dissuading her from within. They screamed her muted prayers were vain and fraudulent. The figurine on the headboard her witness, she had never believed in Heaven. The voices suggested she called on her Ndebele ancestors.

When he had put all the instruments in the compartment, he closed the door. The purplish light flooded the interior of the autoclave again.

“Suddenly you look like someone experiencing acute hypothermia.” He turned to her. “Admittedly, Auschwitz and all the concentration camps were closed, but now large parts of the world in South America, Asia and Africa are sundry concentration camps. German research is still going on at a vehement pace. German scientists need cheap human organs from the blacks and the Hispanics of this world. We sell surplus organs to make the project self-funding.” He smiled. “I’m a distinguished member of a network with agents in London, Stockholm, Sydney, New York, New Delhi and Johannesburg. Our business is to find second-rate silly people like you. It’s a very rewarding business, I must say, and the cause is forever noble.”

Her heart thundered. She struggled with the unyielding straps, begging him with her eyes to unbind her. He unzipped one of the

suitcases and took out a number of folded large plastic bags, the ones normally used by the City Council's Department of Refuse collection in high-density areas. She guessed there were about ten. He placed them near the bed.

"There's a private jet parked in a hangar at Joshua Mqabuko Airport as I speak. When I'm done with you, I'll take your organs by taxi to the airport where someone will fly them to Johannesburg for a direct connecting flight with others to Berlin for sorting. Should the sorting office realise an excess, such will be couriered to international buyers throughout the world. As much as half a million euro can be made from your organs alone should they remain decontaminated until they reach Berlin or other places beyond. First-rate career guidance consultants will tell you the best job is one anyone would heartily enjoy, perform with little effort and pays handsomely. Because of that, I go to great lengths to ensure sterilisation and decontamination at all stages of the procedures I'll perform on you shortly. I'm blessed among men."

From the same suitcase, he removed new self-sealing sample bags of various sizes, and placed them neatly on the table. Cotton swabs, corked laboratory bottles, some marked "Methylated Spirit/ Nitric acid/ Alcohol sol/ Iodine sol/ Alpha Chlorophin @ pH 7.6/"etc, etc, and two small canisters labelled *Cyclopropane MAC 9.2%* and *Halothane MAC 0.75%* followed, until there was an array of bottles and surgical consumables. He set them on the table now clustered.

"You don't have to be afraid. I'll use Halothane. This anaesthetic achieves deep levels of anaesthesia easily. It's a dangerous drug in the hands of inexperienced personnel. It depresses ventilation and blood circulation due to its direct effect on the myocardium." He spoke as if he was lecturing to an invisible medical class. "The heart is slowed. I must point out that ventricular extra-systoles may occur. Plainly speaking, you risk cardiac arrest."

She shook her head.

“ Anyway, you’ll be dead by the time I’m through with you. The whole idea is to delay both somatic and cardiac death for as long as possible in order to harvest the organs at their optimum performance. I’m particularly interested in your kidneys, spleen, pancreas, liver, the uterus complete with its fallopian tubes, and your athletic heart. Outside my Nazi contribution, I know of a one-eyed Latino in Chicago who would part with a large amount for your left eye. There’s always a buyer for the brain, alive or dead. This translates to a lot of incisions in delicate tissues.”

Nomathemba trembled and attempted to pray, but she failed to form meaningful sentences. She had no personal relationship with God.

From the other suitcase, the man took out a small sealed packet printed *latex gloves*. He also removed two stainless steel surgical trays and placed them on the table. He poured measures of alcohol in one and the spirit in the other. An alcoholic stench filled the room. From the autoclave, he removed the scalpel, all the blades and two different pairs of scissors and immersed them in the alcohol.

“Though we kiss and do all sorts of things to express love and arouse each other, you must know that no matter how clean the human body is to the naked eye, it remains one of the dirtiest things in the explored universe.”

He sat on the edge of the bed. With a surgical blade, he spent the next ten minutes shaving her head egg-bald, here and there drawing blood. As he shaved her, he sang in a foreign language unknown to her. She whimpered and cringed as the blade swept down her head endlessly, and cried quietly when it cut into her skin. Then he moved to her public area, pausing in his singing to tell her he was singing the National Anthem of Germany.

When she was shaven, he carefully removed the gloves, cast them in a plastic bag at his feet and put on new ones. Dipping a swab in spirit, he cleaned her head with it, the chemical soaking into her bleeding cuts. She whimpered and wriggled, but he was indifferent to

her pain. He used another swab to clean her pubic area, and began to scrub her belly and chest with swabs dipped in separate iodine and alcohol solutions. He did it mutely and thoroughly, casting the soiled swabs in the plastic bag on the floor.

He resumed singing, shamelessly looking her in the eyes regularly. The Germanic Anthem irritated her. "I'm not a heartless man, Emilia. It's my custom to donate some of the proceeds to Green Peace and the SPCA in various countries. If this isn't noble then what is?" He grinned again. "A new Germany born out of the vengeance of the unforgettable Second World War won't waste money investing in space technology. Diehard Aryans are preparing for a Third World War, a blitzkrieg of biological and chemical warfare. That's why we need the organs."

She shook her head pitifully, looking into his eyes, vainly appealing for any vestige of humanity in him. His eyes lacked remorse.

Suddenly he seemed to remember something. Again, he went to the closet from which he fetched something that looked like a small cooler-box. He placed it on the table.

"I'll not sugar-coat my words." He began to pace the length and breadth of the room, speaking calmly. "This is what I'll do to you, Emilia. I'll make you inhale a volatile anaesthetic." He pointed at the canister marked *Halothane*. "You'll inhale an amount that'll make you lose sensation in your body. I don't want your sight and hearing to go. You'll also have the privilege to watch an Aryan surgeon at work."

In a bid to attract his attention and see her pleading eyes, she made some muffled noises. The attempt was vain; he continued to pace and ogle at the walls.

"I'll make deep incisions into your belly foremost. I must extract the liver before freelancing toxins damage it. Then I'll remove the kidneys and other organs. The chopper will assist me pry open your ribcage. Trust me; I've done this in Bolivia under worse conditions."

When he stopped speaking, he was facing a wall, his back to her. She felt he might not have the nerve to face her and might actually recoil from killing her. She stared at him, hopeful. There remained a chance this was sadistic drama, and he would enjoy the last laugh when he recounted how terrified she looked. Time stood still. Perhaps he was thinking, she couldn't tell. Optimism aside, clearly she was at the mercy of a psychopath, probably a true descendent of one Amon Goeth she knew little about.

He turned around and resumed pacing. "I take it you've never smoked. Smoking is a very bad habit, Emilia. Research shows every cigarette smoked reduces a person's lifespan by five minutes, on average of course. Anyway, I don't have to speculate, your lungs will reveal if you ever smoked. If they're bad, I'll just leave them intact and go for the kidneys. If by then you're still conscious, which is very possible, I'll have to disinfect the area around your left eye. Someone needs that eye. You'll have to shut your eyes tight to avoid undue exposure to the chemicals. Alpha chlorophin at pH 7.6 can be very irritating to the eyes." He stopped and inhaled loudly.

She took it he was losing patience. When he resumed speaking, she detected a cruel urgency in his voice. He arranged the trays beside her on the bed, closely examining the scalpel, the pairs of scissors and the blades. He discarded the gloves he was wearing and wore another pair.

"The entire vascular system of an adult contains five quarts of blood. You don't have to worry about ending up in a bloodbath. As I explained, Halothane slows down circulation, which means you won't bleed excessively. I'll hazard and suppose the incisions won't kill you, but a systematic removal of vital organs. Had I connected you to an intravenous bottle for dextrous feeding and hydration, you might've been shocked to see how long you could've lived without some of your vital organs. It's very interesting."

She didn't want to listen to him, but there was no way she could plug her ears.

“Finally, I’ll cut your body to pieces and put them in the large plastic bags, which I’ll pack in the suitcases. A man is ready to incinerate the suitcases, your clothes, all the surgical consumables.” He glanced at the figurine on the headboard. “Your pagan figurine my witness, by 9 am tomorrow when chambermaids come, they’ll find this place spot-free. Somewhere in the city, the wind will be sweeping your ashes in swirls from an incinerator bay. Now if you believe in Heaven, this is your last opportunity to make peace with God or with your ancestors. African beliefs can be very absurd.”

He pulled the chair to the bedside and sat in it, leaning forward, her midsection directly below his gaze. Nomathemba’s bowels rumbled loudly. He fitted a long blade in the scalpel and quickly reached for the Halothane canister.

Her resolutions were twofold; he wasn’t going to kill her easily and he wasn’t going to harvest her organs while she was alive. This was the time to double her efforts and try to make as much noise as possible. Wriggling and arching her back repeatedly, at the same time jerking the straps, she rocked the bed but the noises she made didn’t amount to an alarm. Sweat beads stood on her forehead. The effort shifted the bed, but only a little.

He put the scalpel on the bed and picked the TV set’s remote controller on the headboard. With the controller, he turned on the TV set and quickly increased the volume as the screen hissed alive, crackling with sound and light. The BBC was showing a special documentary on oil spillage in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. The documentary featured scores of ammunition-wound black militiamen in hoods, bandanas and balaclavas wielding machetes, assault rifles and rocket launchers. The men were singing and dancing. Their noise filled the room.

He turned the canister towards her face and sprayed her thrice in the nostrils as she struggled. “These aren’t the best of conditions, needless to say. We don’t have anaesthetic apparatus for the proper administration of the gas. However, we’ll have to make do with my

experience and instincts. I like it when you struggle like that. It means you're inhaling more of the drug. Pretty soon, your ventilation and circulation will be depressed."

The vapour that came out was odourless. She stopped struggling; to halt breathing for as long as possible, but already disorientation overrode her senses and her fingers were numbing. When she wanted to resume breathing, she did it with difficulty, her ribcage seeming to disobey her volition to inhale.

He sprayed her thrice again. "Many anaesthetists would avoid exceeding a halothane concentration of 0.5 percent in a patient. Anything above that level induces hypotension and respiratory failure. Struggle and inhale at your own risk."

Her body gradually went limp. In a few seconds, she couldn't feel her legs and arms. Again, he sprayed her thrice in the nostrils and waited. She saw him reaching between her legs, making a cruel face and pinching. Yet she didn't know what he pinched because she didn't feel anything. He pulled off the adhesive tape impersonally, fished the handkerchief from her mouth and threw both on the floor. She wanted to inhale and scream, but her jaws couldn't move.

A few more seconds, she became rigid and unsure if she was breathing or air diffused in and out of her lungs. She watched him put away the canister on the table and sit in the chair, the scalpel in his hand. Its blade caught in the light, frightening her. He brought it to her sternum and began to cut downwards. She didn't feel anything, but a gaping wound that bled gently appeared. Tears dammed in her eyes. His image swayed. He cut deeper into her, making a longitudinal incision linking her sternum with the upper part of her groin.

She had to pray. There was a basic prayer many people knew, yet it evaded her for a while. Suddenly it came to her. Recalling, she prayed mutely: "*Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thou name, Thy kingdom come. Thy—*"

Oh! God, she gasped feebly, aborting the prayer. He was disembowelling her. It was horrendous. With great effort, she closed her eyes.

Chapter 5

After the mysterious disturbance in the middle of the night, Matipa lay on the bed frightened and bewildered. For hope and an assurance her life wouldn't end that night, that something grand awaited her in the future, she recalled the prophecy delivered at the apostolic shrine on the eve of the New Year:

Multitudes pack the shrine. The prophet goes round the fire and stares at the womenfolk, seemingly scanning. After a while, he points at her. She kneels on the ground, her hands clasped in humility. "Madzimai, tell your husband at God's appointed time he'll pick digging tools and dig. Go and say to his face, 'The prophet says when you dig, dig, dig, and dig!' Madzimai, wealth awaits you and your husband underground! If you can turn him from his wickedness, he'll find the wealth sooner than later! Make God's bosom your habitation!"

The recollection soothed her to sleep, but as confirmation the night of 7 December wasn't ordinary, further mystery caught up with her in her dreams. She dreamt gliding above rugged rocky cliffs in an uninhabited mountainous area unfamiliar to her.

She was high in the sky like a kite, drifting near portentous, dark shifting and swirling clouds that sought to devour her, it seemed. Because she knew she was wingless, and the invisible force that gave her buoyancy and propelled her was her lifeline, fear was her companion. The earth was too far below. On it, she would splatter to a certain death if she fell. The clouds were gloomy by their appearance and turbulence. Her safety rested on the resilience of whatever borne her between earth and Heaven. Yes, she learnt, the ground below was man's world, her world, and the dome was God's abode. She should've known earlier, but it hadn't occurred to her until then.

The appearance of Heaven was worrisome. Why was the ethereal world so threatening? Was she ascending for the ultimate audience with the Master of the

Day of Judgment? Were her earthly sins tinting her view of a peaceful reality for her to abort and fall to her second death? She searched above her for signs perchance she might catch a glimpse of trumpets or angels, something to urge her on. Instead, she saw a distant blob, shadowy and animated. It was gliding toward her at a tremendous speed, looming in her eyes. The jetting figure became a silhouette, which kept coming. She noticed it was a man in dark clothing. He was on a horse. Was this the rider in pale clothing written in the Book of Revelations; the deadly rider God cautioned humankind to beware because with him would come death?

Suddenly all the scriptures came to a head within her. She wasn't supposed to fear anything: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I'll fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me... No weapon fashioned against me shall prosper... Yet her boldness faltered; she lacked the resolve to believe, and she looked down.

Below she discerned another movement on a cliff directly beneath her. Squinting, she noticed the blotted figure of a man dwarfed by height, but the figure below wasn't pertinent, the rider was. If she ignored the rider, she could collide with him and fall to her death. She looked ahead. The rider was now nearer and scything towards her, acquiring details and colour, becoming more distinguishable by the second. The rider loomed, a dark figure. He was black and in striped loose clothing.

However, contrary to the unnerving verse that stupefied and dangerously transfixed her, she remembered a biblical occurrence; the appearance to Joshua of the Archangel Michael in outstanding apparel when the trekking Jews were battling five kings and the Israelites were on the verge of defeat. At first, the archangel looked hostile to Joshua and his warriors, but when the heavenly being was interrogated, the Jews were happy to learn the archangel was the commander of heavenly legions God sent to assist the Chosen Tribe smite their enemies that day.

Looking at the rider racing towards her, she chose not to be sceptical. To think and believe Heaven had despatched an angel to assist her in her moment of need when she was precariously in the air was an act of faith. A person of faith

pleased God. How thoughtful of God to send her an angel, she reflected, probably the Archangel Michael.

No sooner had she thanked Heaven than she recognised the rider, Emedhi. He rode towards her, a drawn sword raised to strike. She screamed with all her energy, her pitched voice boring into the clouds, stilling them. By screaming, it appeared, she had breached some law. As the clouds lost their turbulence, the earth became tumultuous.

The gravity she had defied all along pulled her ruthlessly. As she fell headlong, she understood it was the shifting and all the ominous movements formerly in the clouds that constituted gravity and were now acting on her. The earth rushed towards her, so did the lonesome figure directly below her. The figure acquired details, quickly becoming distinguishable. It was an unmistakeable kinky man with angular jaws and shoulders, a man wasted by resignation to fasting, Madzibaba Jatropa. He was naked and unashamed of his nudity. The prophet placed a colossal earthen bowl full of water to cushion her landing. Somehow, she knew if he meant good the water would break her fall. If he meant evil, she would drown in it. Rushing air swished in her ears. She prayed she would plunge safely in the bowl. If she missed it, she would definitely spatter on the rocky cliffs. Her remains, shreds of flesh mingled with fractured bones, would tumble down the cliffs for scavengers and predators roaming the valleys to devour.

Free falling, when she could clearly see the gigantic bowl, she noticed something circular and shiny in it. From her altitude, it appeared like a huge lid of a refuse bin. It shed its abstractness as she lost height, and seemed like a mayoral medal. She continued to fall. She discovered it was a clock. Only when she was metres from the bowl did she see it was actually a compass immersed in the water, and the water wasn't deep enough to cushion her landing. Conscious she was falling to her death, she screamed again.

Matipa woke up screaming, and sat up in bed, glad her predicament was illusionary though she was sweating copiously. All the recent absurd developments came to a head in her...Remegio aflame, Peza lying on broken shards of the wardrobe mirror, the stubborn vulture she bludgeoned, Emedhi returning to the

compound stricken, the dual voices and the footsteps. The oddities overwhelmed her.

Looking about, reality revealed it was morning. The bed was still blocking the inner door to the bedroom. Perhaps she had dreamt of Emedhi because she had fallen asleep with him on her unsettled mind. There was a shrouded matrix working against her, she thought.

Rays of sunlight slanting into the room at an acute angle told her it was daybreak or not long after. The previous night with its enigmas, had intrigued and held her captive until well past midnight. She had slept for a few hours, she figured. Recalling the thuds and other noises she heard on her doorstep and the deathly image of Evans Emedhi as he stared at her house, she dreaded venturing out of the house. The silence outside was untypical of life in the compound. She discerned subdued voices of their immediate neighbours.

Telling herself she wasn't supposed to be afraid, she climbed out of the bed, and remembered the words Emedhi spoke as he walked away: "As the sun rises tomorrow, the compound shall grieve over those it moaned in the past!" What did he mean? The second voice, a replica of Boman's, spoke about cobbled paths. Emedhi was undeniably possessed; spirits spoke in the abstract. The utterances were riddles, she thought as she stood amid the shards of the shattered bowl she destroyed out of her hatred of Jatropa's hypocrisy and paganism.

The names *Gillian* and *Nomathemba* seemed fabrications designed to make her live in fear of losing her husband. Consequently, she would've to be dependent on the so-called Man of God for stability in her marriage. The bogus prophet and the bowls no longer had significance in her life. She hoped she was in the process of finding her senses again to worship God scripturally for His iridescence and magnificence to be a stockade around her life and family. Still, it would be interesting to see how the bowl inscribed *Gillian* would strike Akar.

The suitcases and the bicycle still lay on the floor amid the other baggage that was on the wardrobe unit. Starting with the bicycle, broken property she knew was beyond repair; she moved the items from the centre of the room to the furthest wall and pulled the bed from the door. In the lounge-cum-kitchen, she stared at the two-seater sofa she placed against the main door. Grunting, she pulled the sofa from the door to its original position.

Reliving the night's mysteries as she repositioned furniture, she worried about what lay in the wake of the horrific night. She stared at the latched door. A feeling the door was her last defence brought a chill on her. It wasn't far-fetched the nocturnal visitors had cast something physical at her door. The item had shattered, she recalled. Perhaps it was an earthen pot filled with evil juju. Opening the door could let in malevolent things that could attack her physically or spiritually.

However, the compound was awake and many people could come to her aid if she screamed. Besides, the God she worshipped, not the false one of *Madzibaba* Jatropha and the apostolic sect, was vigilant. With the Almighty behind her, she was armoured against anything. For one to call oneself a child of God and yet remain fearful of evil belittled God, she thought, bracing herself and reaching for the door. She unlatched the door, inhaling as she did so to steady her nerves. She pulled the door open and looked outside. First, she looked at the threshold and cast her eyes on the footpaths. Immediately, her eyes bulged and she felt faint.

On the threshold was a shattered human skull. The bones were menacing. Decayed molars indicated it was the skull of an adult complete with the lower jaw. Soiled human bones littered the compound's footpaths and some courtyards. She noticed that very few people had ventured outside. Actually, it was mostly puzzled elders inspecting the funereal spectacle, talking in low tones and gesturing bewilderment.

Directly before her, about a hundred metres away, was Mr Emedhi's dwelling, a cluster of backward huts. Her eyes widened further. Despite herself, her lower lip trembled, her armpits dampened. The hospital escapee sat like a statue on a low wooden stool facing her house. The man who had spoken in Bomani Kumanda's blood-curdling voice was still in the hospital garbs. A cold wave struck her, the onset of profound fear. This man was the devil's representative. She suspected he leaned a little forward when she opened the door, perhaps to take a good look at her, perhaps to frighten her. Neither was she certain if he had moved at all. His poor wife, Stembile, a known victim of alien spirits, stood at his side trying to draw his attention by waving a hand in his face.

Evil spirits attracted evil spirits, Matipa reflected, pitying Stembile, and admitting to herself Akar was the culprit. Because of Akar, the compound had horded evil, and this evil was an intricate and stubborn enigma. Hell had come to Sakis Mine.

Matipa stepped back into the safety of her house and latched the door, a burden to pray mounting on her. In Heaven were legions of angels, and evil was conquered two thousand years at Golgotha. She visualised a tortured Jesus on the cross, and sank on her knees ready to pour out all her fears to God. Like childless Hanna, she would pray. Kneeling amid the shards of broken vessels felt awkward. Were Jatroph's satanic shards not going to frustrate her prayers? Realising by reasoning she was practically entertaining the Devil to detract her, she resolved to pray immediately.

"The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," she began, but a gentle knock came on the door. Her stomach grumbled. She rose, tiptoed to the door and peered outside through a crack.

Ordinarily clothed in a worn out off-white T-shirt and brown trousers hand-sewn in many places, *Madzibaba* Tinashe stood visibly shaken near the threshold, his eyes warily on the broken skull. He kept crossing himself in a bid to wade off evil. A packed *Bartimaens*, the simple white bag for the sect's garbs, hung from his left shoulder.

She unlatched the door and retreated for the apostolic elder to enter. As he stepped over the bones of the shattered skull, he mumbled a protective prayer quickly, pleading with the Archangel Michael to stand by his side and Baba Johannes to watch him as he stepped over the unknown. The elder crossed himself thrice before his leg landed on the other side.

“May the peace of our Lord dwell in this house,” he said mechanically as he entered barefoot and dusty.

Matipa shut the door and gestured towards a sofa away from her, her countenance a register of impatience. There was no longer place and time for the elder and his lot in her house. Her days of paganism and keeping the company of heathens were over. She sat down as he did.

“I came as soon as I heard,” he said, like one passing condolences, placing the bag at his feet. “These are terrible times. There should be something our eyes can’t see that’s certainly of interest to Satan in this compound.”

“Why have you come, *Madzibaba* Tinashe?”

“I was worried about you, *Madzimai* Matipa. We all heard the speakers last night.”

“But you couldn’t confront them. You cowered in your huts and tin houses. What use is a god who can’t protect his followers? Is he worthy of praise and worship?”

He studied her and crossed himself once. “Something crept into you. Guard against blasphemy. All sins shall be forgiven man except sins against the spirit.”

“You remind me of the charlatan running naked in the forest.”

“I don’t want to believe these words are issuing from your mouth. *Madzibaba* Jatrophia is suffering on behalf of God. He’s a Man of God. No one can take that away from him.”

“I thought you came to show me how lost we were in following Jatrophia and his prophecies. I’ve always regarded you as an objective man.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you were a man governed by reason in matters worldly,” she said boldly, “and the Spirit in matters spiritual. A man of your sensibilities ought to see we were lost all along.”

“I don’t follow, *Madzimai*.”

“Admit it. How long do you suppose you’ll bow to an imaginary god... a god whose power is harnessed into earthen bowls?”

“The Devil is trying Prophet Jatropa and the sect. In the Holy Bible, Satan tempted *Dhamreta Yesu* after the Son of Man fasted for forty days and forty nights.”

“Call him Christ... Jesus Christ,” she said crossly, “Don’t call him by any other name when you’re in my house.”

“*Madzimai* Matipa, it’s against our teachings and convictions to be contemptuous. Let not the Devil’s tempests ruffle you. Baba Johannes holds you in his bosom. If you keep the laws and revere Baba Johannes, protection against every force of evil shall be extended to you.”

“I no longer believe in Baba Johannes. I thought as an elder you came to denounce Jatropa and show me the way to God. Colossians 2 verse 8 says: *Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.*”

He smiled slyly. “First Thessalonians 5 verse 14 obliges us to comfort the feeble-minded. I came to see to it you don’t fall.”

“Leave my house.”

“*Madzimai*, why do you treat like a dog a man determined to protect you and your family?”

“*Madzibaba*, Apostle Paul urged the Philippians: *Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers—*”

“I don’t think God likes it when we turn scriptures into Scud missiles. I beg you, *Madzimai*, to fix your eyes on Calvary.”

She sighed in anger. “Why did you come? What can I do for you?”

“Emedhi exhumed many skeletons from graves in the cemetery. He’s in an obvious stupor. Perhaps he wants the spirits of the exhumed to haunt us. No one understands the significance of the action, but my gut feeling is that he needs our apostolic prayers. Baba Johannes gave us power over such cases. The Archangel Michael will hear our plea.”

“I made it clear I no longer subscribe to such fallacies. It’s ridiculous to bow to angels. Baba Johannes was a mortal man... old age and disease killed him. His grave is at Dandadzi Hill in Rusape. The tomb abroad is empty. Leave now, *Madzibaba* Tinashe, I need to pray.”

He gazed at her and shook his head. “Something is manipulating your mind. You need exorcism, *Madzimai* Matipa.”

“You’re the one who’s possessed.”

“*Madzimai*, you don’t mean what you’re saying.”

“Repent and be baptised. Turn away from worshipping Gabriel and Michael.”

The elder shook his head pitifully and crossed himself. “Satan has taken possession of your faculties. I must pray for you before I walk out of this house, or I’ll be judged harshly in Heaven.” He thought hard for a while, frozen, his brow furrowed, and seemed to remember something profound. “*Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels.*”

She shook her head. “That doesn’t sound biblical at all.”

“That’s Colossians 2:18, *Madzimai* Matipa. The Word is a two-edged sword.”

His pity and self-righteousness irked her. “Face the facts,” she said in anger. “A prophesied demon came and scattered the sheep. The same evil is digging up the dead. A demon abducted my son. My heart tells me he’s dead.”

“Your heart isn’t an organ for prophecy, I’m sorry to say.”

“Anyway, I’ve stopped grieving for Peza. Jatrophia is now a maverick in the forest. Remegio is dead. His body lies unclaimed in a

mortuary in Kadoma. Remegio's father and stepmother won't have anything to do with his corpse. You ought to be ashamed of your god."

"That doesn't mean God and Baba Johannes have abandoned Remegio's soul," he said. "Death is a Godly appointment which comes in its season. We didn't join the sect to avoid death. *Madzimai* Matipa, the summoning from Hell of the Passover angel shows everything is in God's hands."

"Emedhi is turning into stone before our eyes. In this compound, we continue to feel the presence of the demon. What reason do I've to hold on to the sect? We're on our own. We've always been on our own. If you're loaded with compassion and convinced you're in Baba Johannes's bosom, go and pray for Mr Emedhi."

"*Madzimai* Matipa—"

"Never call me *madzimai* again. I'd hate to down dress you, literally speaking."

He crossed himself, picked the bag at his feet and rose. Despite the assumed humility in his slightly tilted head and clasped hands, she saw from his rapid breathing that she had angered him. He looked down at her, his face expectant of soothing parting words or an apology. She stood up and pointed at the door.

"I stood by you from the day I learnt your family was in a predicament," he almost pleaded. "On the day *Madzibaba* Remegio was set on fire, I went outside our apostolic convictions to make sure you and your family were protected. I've shown you more love than I've probably given my wife. My visit here was born out of that love."

She folded her arms across her chest, flabbergasted. "Are you proposing to me, *Madzibaba* Tinashe?"

"I'm not a carnal man. God ordained me an elder. I'm performing my God-given office."

"I kindly ask you to perform it to those who require it. To prove you don't have ulterior motives leave now. This house is now out of bounds to anyone from the sect."

To her astonishment, he crossed himself and squatted in humility. “Though I’m the wronged one, I wish to apologise for visiting you and assuming we were still flock in the same fold. I beg you to accept my sincere regret, Mrs Muja. It’s humble and noble to apologise.”

“Apologise to God, not me. By blinding yourself to realities and following a shoddy faith, it’s His wrath you’re courting.” She pointed at the door again. “Please, go. The neighbours might misinterpret your visit. My husband won’t be amused.”

He made no sign to rise. “It’s dangerous to snub a Man of God. It’s disastrous to throw ashes in the face of a Good Samaritan. Anywhere, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob fights my battles. On my knees, I shall fight you or whatever is speaking through you.”

“If I scream and tear my clothes, you’ll be incarcerated for many years, but not before the people in the compound have thoroughly beaten you.” She held the front part of her dress in both hands.

Madzibaba Tinashe stared in disbelief at her, then rose and slowly crossed to the door, his bewildered eyes still riveted on her. He opened the door and stepped outside. She saw him hesitating again to step over the pieces of the broken skull. Drawing air, he crossed himself and raised a foot. She closed the door and latched it immediately.

Resolved nothing but prayer would redeem her, she knelt and meditated about Hanna; how the woman emptied her grief to God until Eli thought she was intoxicated. She would pray that way; her life depended on it. The return of her husband seemed pertinent. It would lead to the return of Peza or the recovery of his remains. Of importance was the cessation of the mysteries in the compound, which she knew the compound dwellers blamed on Akar. Then she would ask God to assist them relocate, find a gainful and commendable livelihood elsewhere, for social acceptability. The notice of expulsion from Sakis Mine hovered over her head. The world was broader than Mr Artaxerxes Korykos and his mine; there was always somewhere to go. God was Alpha and Omega.

She closed her eyes to pray, but a nagging inner voice condemned her for the treatment she gave *Madzibaba* Tinashe, ordering her to repent and make peace with the elder before God could grant her audience. *Pursue peace with every man without which no one can see God.* The verse confronted her relentlessly until, still in the prayer posture, she admitted to herself such verses made worshipping God daunting; and righteousness before God impossible. Several minutes passed. She could neither pray nor rise.

Another knock came. Unlike *Madzibaba* Tinashe's about twenty minutes ago, it was timid. Nearly tripping from a haste born of curiosity and fear, she rose and stepped to peer outside through the same crack in the door. Ivy stood on the threshold, her eyes on the crushed skull, but the receptionist kept looking behind her shoulder.

Matipa saw that Ivy was devastated. What message was she bringing her from the mine management? Beyond her was Emedhi, still seated on the stool and inert. The office orderly's stiffness was fast proving an infirmity. His wife hadn't left his side and *Madzibaba* Tinashe had joined them. The elder was pulling his apostolic garments from the bag in preparation to cast out of him the medically indecipherable problem the Cuban doctor had termed Muenchmeyer Syndrome or *Fibrodysplasiasomething-something* in his learned ignorance.

Matipa pulled the door open as the visitor resumed knocking. Ivy quickly walked in as if tangible danger chased her. A rich and lingering fragrance followed her into the room. The visitor was in a white lacy top, a hugging jeans trousers and brown leather boots. A sparkling necklace of polished jewels, probably imitation diamonds and platinum, graced her chimney-like neck. A consequent aura of superiority shied men from her, thought Matipa.

For someone working in an anomalous environment, she looked like Madonna in a rundown Malawian village. On 29 November when she gave her the two hundred dollars she said was from Akar, Matipa was beside herself with fear to appraise her. The young

woman was a profusion of thick European hair in nectar waves sewn to her head and cascading to her slender shoulder blades. Face powder camouflaged most of the pimples and black spots on her cheeks. Though she was indisputably ugly, she carried herself with phantom ease like one without frailties, blemishes and beyond frustration. Yet her most irksome tendency was looking at workers and their wives as if they were a subhuman species.

“Sorry to kind of intrude, Mrs Muja. I don’t know where to start. Jesus!”

Matipa couldn’t help mutely disapproving the stereotyped young African woman, tall, flat-bottomed and sickening in her assumed European bearing and accent. She appraised her sarcastically as a glamorous whiff of Ivy’s perfume filled her nostrils. *What brings you here, Jezebel?* “If you haven’t come to compound my misery, start anywhere.”

“I’m at a loss though I’m with you in your shock and grief. It’s a pity this is a developing country. If we were in Europe or America the police could’ve done more.”

“I’ve come to accept that what happened was bidden.”

“There should’ve been a systematic manhunt with sniffer dogs, horses and helicopters for Peza. The forests should’ve been combed and every burrow, cave, thicket and alcove searched.”

“Strange things are happening, Ivy. The unbelievable now typify life here.”

“We can’t continue to take this weirdness in our stride any longer. The distinction between reality and the supernatural is blurring. You may not be comfortable talking about it, but there’s an overarching mystery taking place here at Sakis.”

“I agree.”

“Bluntly, Mrs Muja, something is stalking you. Hell has conspired against your family. Everyone around you is in danger too. No one knows what would happen should the gang return. People are terrified. As I stand in this house, I’m scared too, but only a little

because I believe in God's protection." she paused. When she continued, her voice was solicitous. "But I thought I could help, or at least I know someone who can help you."

She gestured Ivy to sit in the sofa the elder sat in minutes ago.

Matipa sat across her. The door crackled as it swayed on its own to close, but midway it stopped ajar with the trio outside in Matipa's view. She wished the door would close; continued sight of Emedhi swelled her paranoia of the day and a growing pessimism. However, it would be good to steal a view of the elder in action. If *Madzibaba* Tinashe cast out the spell, she could reconsider subscribing to the faith again. Perhaps by renouncing the prophet, the faith and Baba Johannes she had possibly erred.

"You're looking at me strangely, Mrs Muja. Maybe I should leave you alone. I'm sorry for invading your privacy."

"No. *I'm* sorry, Ivy. Everything considered; I tend to be preoccupied easily."

"You make me feel awkward with your stares."

"You don't have to be too apologetic. You'd no hand in our misfortune."

"There's a man I know, a renowned Man of God, who I think can pull you out of this."

Matipa shook her head in disapproval. "Backyard prophets and so-called men of God make me sick, Ivy," she said in restrained anger.

"Oh, I'm sorry I shouldn't have come. I knew you would object along religious lines." She made to rise.

Matipa kindly motioned her to resume her seat.

Ivy sank in the sofa again and continued, "But like a number of people here I realise you and everybody at Sakis is under siege, sort of. Lately a number of mysterious things have happened, needless for me to say. Last night Emedhi dug up many skeletons from the graveyard. Many people heard and saw that Jatropa assisted him. Witnesses say he was the second speaker the people heard last night."

The revelation stunned her. How had the cloaked matrix roped in the amok charlatan? By what mechanism was Bomani Kumanda reaching out to these people and manipulating them against her and the compound?

“Some families have gathered at the office,” Ivy continued.

“Has the mill manager called for a meeting?”

“No, Mrs Muja. People want you evicted from the compound immediately before everyone is ruined. Workers are ready to dump all your belongings along the Harare-Bulawayo highway. The families are trying to coerce Mr Keneas into giving the nod.”

Anger gushed from Matipa. “Do they suppose I’d be better off if I took my life? You all think I’m the author of this disaster! Can’t anybody see I’m a victim too? If you came to expel me, then what’re you waiting for? Of all the people at this mine, you chose to be the devil’s advocate.”

“What’re you talking about, Mrs Muja?”

“You know what I’m talking about. You chose to be the one heartless enough to bring such a message to me.”

“No. I came because I didn’t want to be in league with the crowd.”

“I was right in wishing you dead all these years. You’re a disgrace, Ivy.” She shot spittle near Ivy’s feet. “Where would I go without my son and husband? Tell me! Tell me now!”

Ivy looked at the spittle, made a bewildered face and shook her head. “You’re wrong and you rush to conclude.”

“I can’t believe you chose to be the workers’ spokesperson! I just can’t believe it!”

“You’re shouting, Mrs Muja. I’m on your side.”

“You’re on my side?”

“I calmed everybody and persuaded Mr Keneas not to expel you before Christmas. This is the eighth. The dismissal letter says you should be gone on or before Christmas.” She jumped to her feet, her lower lip quivering with rage. “Thank you for hating me for no

reason and saying it to my face. I don't know what's wrong with you people. Many of you're prejudiced against me despite my efforts for better remuneration and working conditions for your husbands."

Ivy's rage and apparent honesty appealed to Matipa's anger. Indeed people and she were prejudiced against the receptionist. She had nothing tangible to hold against Ivy except a feeling she was promiscuous and immoral enough to date the mill manager. Even if she were moonlighting with Mr Keneas, was it anyone or Matipa's business?

Matipa looked at the floor, stared at her spittle and, shying from it, looked at the wall. She didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry, Ivy. I said it out of anger and frustration. It was foolish of me. Please, sit down. I suppose God inspired you to calm the people who have turned against us." She forced herself to look into the eyes of her visitor. "God bless you, Ivy."

"God bless you too, Mrs Muja. People here think I'm a bitch. When I go to the bank in Kwekwe or Kadoma with Mr GK, you all think we're dating. It makes me sick. Gilchrist is a married man. So is Mr AK."

"I beg you to sit down." Matipa watched her sitting reluctantly. "Often the mouth rushes to speak ahead of the mind. I said words which I wasn't supposed to utter."

Through the door, she saw *Madzibaba* Tinashe kneeling facing eastwards near Emedhi and his wife. The elder was angelic in his flowing and flapping apostolic garments. His head began to nod to a rhythm out of Matipa's earshot. She knew he was singing in low tones, preliminarily. Songs were a prelude to apostolic prayers. In a few seconds, his voice grew almost to a crescendo that attracted onlookers. He sang a song that invited Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to intervene in the trials and tribulations on earth.

Matipa looked at her visitor. "Let's put the unfortunate incident behind us."

Ivy gave her an inquisitive stare.

“I want to hear more about the Man of God you talked about. My options are too limited.”

“What’re your options, if I may know?”

“They’re only two. It’s either I leave without my son and husband or....”

“Go on, Mrs Muja.”

“Or I commit suicide. If I took my life, for me it would be over, but I won’t dare until I know Peza’s fate. For his sake I’ll refrain from suicide.”

“Suicides are sent to Hell. All along, I held you in high esteem as someone fearful of God. I saw it in your commitment to your faith though I’ve my own persuasion. I didn’t know you were wishing me dead.”

“I’m sorry. Tell me about the man you suppose can help us.”

She shrugged slightly. “His name is Pastor Ojo Ojele. He’s single and about thirty-five years old. God is using him mightily. People call him Pastor O.”

“You’re telling me you’re a Christian?”

Ivy nodded. “He’s my pastor in Kadoma.”

“You’ve never sounded or looked it, I’m sorry to say. Allow me to ask, and I mean no offence: are Christians allowed to dress like prostitutes?”

“If you mean no offence I’ll answer you. It has never had anything at any time to do with looks, cosmetics and dressing. Thank you for listening. Can I resort to the object of my visit?”

“You say God is greatly using your pastor. Where did he get the power? The world is full of conmen.”

Ivy didn’t mask her annoyance. “Please, spare me that, Mrs Muja. I’m not forcing you to visit him. Pastor Ojele is an anointed man.”

“Tell me more about him.”

“Pastor O started humble. He’s Nigerian, by the way,” she said nodding. “For some time he was an English Master at Abeokuta Grammar School in Western Nigeria. Then the Holy Spirit seized

him one day when he was praying. For a week, he spoke in tongues and fasted without his knowledge.”

“Was it during a school holiday?”

“No. The school expelled him on the grounds of prolonged absenteeism and a suspected insanity because he was moving about Abeokuta speaking in unknown languages. The principal at the grammar school feared he would bring the reputation of the staff members into disrepute.” Ivy shrugged.

“Then what happened?”

“One thing led to another. God anointed him tremendously. He moved to Lagos and started a healing and deliverance ministry, which ran for a few years. But you know how it is, Mrs Muja, men of God are hardly accepted by their own people.”

“True.”

“The Holy Spirit told Pastor Ojele to come to Kadoma in Zimbabwe.”

“How come I’ve never heard of him?”

“At the appointed time things happen. This is the time for you to know Pastor O for your deliverance. Last year he toured the Holy Land for a month. He sneaked into the Temple of Herod and prayed in it among Jews. A priest at the Church of Nativity blessed him.”

“What’s the Holy Land?”

“Israel, Mrs Muja. He walked in the streets of Bethlehem, Joppa and Cana. He fasted on the Mount of Olives. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. He walked barefoot on Golgotha.”

“I don’t see how such a tour would make anyone holy.”

“Pastor Ojele brought water from the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. It has healing powers. In a special room in our church are rocks from Mt Sinai and sand from the Sinai Wilderness. Moses brought the Israelites to Mt Sinai. Pastor O brought the Holy Land to Kadoma and his congregation. He brought pictures of himself meditating on top of Mount Tabor.”

“Mount Tabor? What has a mountain got to do with faith?”

“On Mount Tabor, Christ transfigured before Peter, John and James. Read the bible, Mrs Muja.”

“Do *you* read the bible, Ivy?”

“I study the bible. I search the scriptures.”

Matipa thought for a while. “What’s the name of your church?”

“*Joppa International Ministries.*”

“It’s a strange name.”

“At Joppa Peter received a revelation directing him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Today Joppa is Jaffa, a town on the southwest coast of Palestine. In ancient times, it was the only town more Jewish than gentile.”

“What do you do at the church?”

“I emcee. I teach Sunday school. I usher... so many things.”

“I see. I see,” she said thoughtfully. “You come at a time when I’m beginning to see how lost I was in following and surrendering myself to the apostolic faith.”

“God is great. I’m happy for you, Mrs Muja. This is worth celebrating.”

“How can I meet Pastor Ojele?”

“Our tabernacle is along Mashonganyika Avenue in Kadoma, a walking distance from the city centre. From Jameson High School, you’ll see it to your left about two hundred metres from Kadoma Hospital. A big signpost stands outside. You can’t miss it.”

“Your church is found in Kadoma only?”

“From Mashonganyika Avenue it’ll spread to Harare, Johannesburg and the rest of the world.”

“But precisely, how’ll Pastor O assist me?”

“He’ll pray for you and your family. If you’ve a curse, he’ll lift it. I suppose he’ll give you something sacred from the Holy Land to bring down here for our protection too. He lives in a cottage at the church. I’ve his mobile number in case you might want to make an appointment, but that’s not necessary. I bet you can find him at the church any time.”

“Eli, the priest, was at the Temple all the time.”

Ivy went on to describe some healing miracles Pastor Ojo Ojele performed in recent months, including three goblins, she alleged he set on fire one Sunday after they came to his cottage the previous night to test his power and torment him. She told her wealthy Norwegians, Australians and Germans built the church as a goodwill donation to Pastor Ojele for allowing the Holy Spirit to use him.

“That’s amazing, Ivy.”

“Yes, it is. Believe whatever Pastor Ojele will tell you. The Bible says there were many lepers in the days of Prophet Elijah, but he healed only one. It says there were many widows when the Prophet Elisha walked this earth overseas, but the Lord sent him to only one.” She paused. “Many afflicted people have visited Pastor O. Some returned to their homes with their afflictions. When you visit him, believe in your heart he was sent to deliver no one but you in the whole wide world.”

Matipa stared at her, Ivy’s articulation of the scriptures humbling her beyond words. She couldn’t believe the receptionist-cum-secretary, a person she had perceived for three years as an aloof, superlative prostitute, was speaking the Word of God.

“May I give you a verse to keep you focused?”

“Go ahead, Ivy. I’ll be glad to commit it to memory.”

“Find time to read it.”

Ivy recited the verse, but Matipa was no longer listening. Her eyes were on the apostolic elder outside. *Madzibaba* Tinashe stopped singing, crossed himself thrice and went to stand behind Emedhi, his hands raised prayerfully. Emedhi’s wife stepped back. Matipa heard the elder reciting the mandatory opening of prayer and calling on archangels to receive and forward his prayer to Peter. Matipa pitied the elder; the entire opening was a nonsensical waste of time, which probably offended God. Now she could see that the archetypal prayer was religious and spiritually retrogressive.

Ivy had made impressing her host with tales of Pastor Ojele's powers her prerogative. Matipa listened, but her eyes were on *Madzibaba* Tinashe outside. A premonition was building in her that from the proximity with Emedhi, *Madzibaba* Tinashe was hording evil for himself. Nevertheless, she didn't want to dwell on hunches, which were often misleading. The number of onlookers was swelling, but they kept a cautious distance.

Madzibaba Tinashe then placed his right hand on Emedhi's head, the left one raised heavenwards like some spiritual receptor. The orderly suddenly turned, grabbing the hand upon him and twisting it as he rose from the stool, pivoting for maximum exertion. In no time, the sect's elder was in a hammerlock, his arm awry behind his back. Matipa rose and pointed outside, stopping Ivy in mid-sentence as the latter turned to look at the action through the open door.

"What's happening?" Ivy asked rising, her eyes widening. "Can't someone stop him?"

Matipa shook her head pitifully, her eyes fixed outside. "Emedhi has turned against the elder. God isn't with *Madzibaba* Tinashe."

Empathetic onlookers cringed fearfully for the apostolic man. A man shouted obscenities at Emedhi to let go, making as if to pick objects to pelt him. Women screamed in alarm, but the stony man continued to twist and pivot, the expression on his face indifferent, until his victim bared all his teeth and roared in agony arching backwards. Emedhi slowly raised his free hand, clenched a fist and brought it down like a hammer on the elder's chest without letting go the twisted arm. The elder cried in agony, his knees nearly buckling from the impact. The hand went up and came down with devastating force on the same spot, rocking the trapped man again. *Madzibaba* Tinashe coughed several times and spat something. It was blood, Matipa noticed.

Blood began to flow freely from his nose and mouth, glistening in his goatee beard as the rays of the sun caught it. Emedhi let go of his arm and walked lethargically towards a neighbour's hut. *Madzibaba*

Tinashe staggered, sank on his knees and grabbed his chest with one hand while the other nursed his throat. Blood poured from the elder's mouth, reddening the front part of his white garments. Life stood still in the vicinity. Matipa discerned gurgling and choking sounds as the elder slumped to the ground face first. About half a dozen men ran to him.

Matipa held her mouth. "He won't make it. This attack was prophesised."

"What're you talking about, Mrs Muja? My God, you're shaking."

"Bomani... the man who kidnapped my son...is in our midst. If people knew better they'd lock themselves in their houses now."

No sooner had she finished speaking than Mr Emedhi shot from the neighbour's hut wielding a large homemade metal axe. In a shrieking frenzy, he ran spiritedly like a vengeful Apache warrior.

Chapter 6

Binga Jochoma turned off the shower resolved to return to his family. Gillian and his loss, over five thousand dollars, were his preoccupation. Every time it crossed his mind he was suddenly penniless, he sighed and clenched his fists in anger.

The intended robbery of the *Mona Lisa* was now a blurred dream within a dream. Now that he had squandered the airfare, he couldn't see himself entering the Louvre through its major entrance in the Pyramid in the main court. He could no longer see himself as the calm and collected African walking the long underground passages and riding the escalators of the museum to the Grand Gallery. Everything, including blowing the Plexiglas protecting the famed *Mona Lisa*, sprinkling Da Vinci's masterpiece with extraordinary disappearance juju and laying his hands on the famous painting rendered invisible as mayhem reigned in the Denon Wing, became a far-fetched non-achievable feat. The squander of more than five thousand dollars in less than a week ensured Da Vinci's remains wouldn't turn in his tomb at Amboise Castle in France's Loire Valley.

Gillian Gadaga had failed him. He hated her, but displaying hatred wasn't courteous and his nature. One thing was certain; his continued stay in Chitungwiza was retrogressive. He had had enough of Gillian, sexually. The young woman had nothing else to offer. The mystery, self-worth and reservation he wished to see in a woman had left her. Empty of such qualities, she was more of a matchless prostitute, sadly reminding him of many whores he had bedded and regretted it at the end of each act. His stupid yearning to ravage a petite, youthful body, he thought, was his undoing. Her being a university undergraduate had also influenced him, as if the tomes of books she was imbibing at the Faculty of Mass Communication had a bearing on her sexuality.

What was the Gadaga family to him? They were nothing but a collection of faceless leeches and swindlers, educated morons, culturally dysfunctional. Mr Gadaga, a school headmaster, was decent by appearance yet a scandal. Binga wished he had brought his mettlesome axe; he would've turned the house into something resembling an abattoir. The weapon was reposing in a stranger's grave at Mbudzi Cemetery.

Sexual intimacy with Gillian proved to be nothing more than eating the same old sickening relish, *munjonjo*, but only in a different bowl. *Munjonjo* was the right word; tasteless wild vegetables prepared with neither cooking oil nor any other ingredient, a relish for the poorest of the poor. Whoever figured the brain was the largest sex organ was a thinker, he mulled. Sex happened in the brain. The same brain was now despising everything and telling him to go home for the same relish. People labelled the bowl "Miss World", "Supermodel" or "University Undergraduate", it didn't matter; the relish remained the same, *munjonjo*.

It's time I thought laterally, he said to himself. *Everything isn't lost. I'm still a man of juju. The prowl on the Shurugwi-Kadoma goldfield is still open to me.*

As he towelled, he applauded himself for the presence of mind to bring Gillian home the previous night so that he could take his leave as decently as possible. The undergraduate hadn't baited him. He was the fool that caused a stir by driving through First Street's promenade in a daring bid to propose to her. He was the blockhead that procrastinated bedding her thinking he was being romantic. He was the imbecile that spent thousands of dollars on a greedy sylph that consumed ice creams, many varieties of pizza, ring doughnuts, French chocolates and numerous cups of decaffeinated tea between meals without gaining a single kilogram of weight. He was the idiot made to stop at every novelty and pawnshop to buy her earrings, wristwatches and necklaces as if she had grown up showered and pampered with such things.

Drying his back, he thought of Peza. He didn't want him to be as foolish. He foresaw him marrying an educated girl of verifiable virginity, one from the remote rural areas of the country, and wedding her in a chapel before a priest. It was his prerogative to bring up his child in an upright manner. In that light, he reflected, Matipa was an asset and a blessing in his life.

His thoughts reverted to Gillian. She was lucky to be alive this day 8 December. What would become of them? From the moment he would say goodbye to the family and drive out of their premises, the illusion *them* would die. Love was an illusion, so was the university girl. Being someone of licentious habits who wasn't what he had hoped she was; Gillian and her pulchritude no longer fascinated him. Peza and Matipa were his world and life, his hope for a better tomorrow. Gillian was a symbol of decadence, a commodity in the hands of her parents, poor civil servants. He was what he was, a murderer.

He put on a pair of cargo pants and a khaki shirt, and walked out of the bathroom into a deserted windowless corridor lit by a naked bulb in a roof without a ceiling. He was passing the closed door to the lounge-cum-kitchen when he overheard his name mentioned. Bertha, Gillian's young sister, was speaking about him in a hushed tone.

Binga stopped at the door and listened, his ear pressed against the door.

"Ralph doesn't smile at anyone besides Gillian," Bertha was saying. "He stares at me. I don't like him, Father."

"Bertha, Bertha," Mr Mpaya Gadaga's voice came in reproachful exasperation. "Why do you hate a good person? He went out of his way to assist us. You've no idea how much a modern funeral costs."

"There's something about him, Father."

"What, Bertha?"

"Babies cry uncontrollably when he's around. It was worse at the funeral. Haven't you noticed, Mother?"

“That’s neither here nor there,” Mrs Gadaga replied. “If it’s happening, I suppose it’s coincidental. You must like him. He’ll be your brother-in-law. Look at his commitment to your sister. If you come of age and find yourself a gentleman of his calibre, I’d be happy for you.”

Silence interrupted by the clatter of utensils passed.

“I had a bad dream about him,” Bertha’s voice broke the silence.

“Come on, Bertha,” the mother interjected summarily. “You’re fourteen years old.”

“So what, Mammy?”

“You’re too young to have meaningful dreams and to understand love. Ralph loves your sister. He did us proud. He’s a gentleman. Where’s Gillian?” She asked on top of her voice.

“I sent her to buy me *The Herald* at the street corner,” the father said. “She wanted to stretch her legs.”

“You should’ve sent this young virago,” the mother quipped jokingly. “We want to enjoy our breakfast in peace.”

“Well,” Bertha’s voice was defiant, “Auntie Rosie is here with baby Sada. You’ll see.”

“Enough, Bertha!” Mr Gadaga’s voice roared and added quietly. “That’s an absurd allegation. Because of him, Gillian now lacks nothing. Because of him, a funeral supposed to display our poverty became a decent event of honour and dignity. On the academic side, he’ll make sure your sister completes her degree. Her future is bright. As for us, we can breathe. Let’s put this matter to rest.”

“Believe me, he’s sleeping with her.”

“Shut up, Bertha!” the mother shouted. “You must know what and what not to say in the presence of your father. Zip it.”

“But I’m only being honest, Mother. You said we should marry properly and wed in the cathedral.”

“Check if he’s finished bathing.” It was the mother’s voice again. “He may need lotion or something.”

“Have you looked at his hands? He’s the hands of a gravedigger. He isn’t the type that uses lotion.”

“That’s enough, Bertha,” it was the father again. “You can say all you want after he’s gone. Defy me and invite a thorough hiding. I last beat you two years ago. Go check if he’s still in the bathroom.”

From the door, he heard a tongue clicking in anger followed by footsteps to the door. Binga walked quietly to a spare bedroom allocated to him for the duration of his stay, a bedroom Gillian had sneaked into the past three nights. On the day they buried her uncle, she came into the bedroom at midnight in a revealing nightgown that left a great proportion of her thighs bare, and sat on the edge of the bed. For a while, she sat forlornly, and he was too stunned to make any move. She missed her uncle, was the reason she stated for the intrusion. He figured it was his supposition she was a virgin that had kept his sensuality in check mode. A girl lost her purity once in her lifetime. Deflowering a girl was a momentous occasion. He planned to do it in a serene and romantic environment.

So he had watched her uneasily, his heart pounding. She stroked his jaw line and chest, the sensuality in the movement of her fingers too expert for a novice, he had thought as he lay inert, playing an all-weather gentleman who took his time, a man too cultured to take a vulnerable girl on the slightest opportunity. This cat and mouse game went on for three nights until he took her to the Bronte Garden Hotel last night, to consummate their relationship naturally in need of alleviation from one heaven to the next. Instead, the outing proved an anticlimax to their affair.

Positioning himself before a homemade bureau that was the bedroom’s dressing table, Binga reached for a bottle of hand lotion with scant contents, Bertha’s footsteps growing louder in the passage. Gillian crossed his mind. He hated her, he told himself. He hated her parents, the dormitory city of Chitungwiza, St Mary’s Roman Catholic Cathedral, the people who attended the funeral, everything and everyone associated with Gillian. Perhaps as he sat in the

Cathedral many people had pitied him for plunging in love head first with a despicable common prostitute, and holding his head high among them for that matter. It was likely a number of people had concealed their laughter as he dug into his pockets to foot the funeral bills.

A knock and Bertha poked her head into the bedroom.

“Hi,” he said in mock pleasant surprise, forcing himself to smile at her. She was against his indifferent disposition, she had said to her parents a while ago. Of all the people in the house, he admitted to himself Bertha was a reasonable frank girl with a morale uprightness of her own. If in his wrath he would hack the family to shreds of flesh and blotches of blood, certainly he would spare the Form 3 girl.

“Hi. Ah, ah, mom was wondering if you needed anything...a comb, lotion or anything.”

“That’s considerate of her, Bertha. But I think I can make do with what’s available.” He put the bottle of lotion on the bureau and faced her squarely. When he spoke, he kept his voice steady to prevent her from discerning lies intermingled with facts. “I grew up poor in a rural village. On several occasions, we had to use cooking oil in lieu of lotion because we couldn’t afford. Four of us slept under one smelling blanket. I chipped my hands beyond healing with menial work so that I could raise my school fees.”

She was speechless for a moment. “Life must’ve been very difficult then. I’m sorry, Ralph.”

He grinned. “Sorry? Why’re you sorry, Bertha?”

She looked at the roof trusses and then at him. “Just felt sorry for you, that’s all. Breakfast will be ready in a minute.”

He resumed applying the lotion to his hands and forearms. “Is Gillian back?”

“Not yet. She went to buy a newspaper.” Her eyes were on his arms. “All those veins! Do you lift weights?”

“I used to. I’m a weapon.” He chuckled.

“If Gillian had another boyfriend, would you kill him?”

“To kill anyone you don’t need a reason. You need courage and singleness of mind. Those who aren’t man enough can’t kill. Some African tribes still consider as boys men who haven’t killed in battle or in cold blood. Adolf Hitler didn’t need a strong reason to send millions of Jews to their death. That’s the story of killing.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

“Everyone has killed one way or the other. Everyone is a murderer.”

“Come on. What do you mean?”

“Those who kill in the way many people understand killing are killers. Those who wish anyone dead without physically taking their lives are equally guilty of killing. That’s what the Bible says, Bertha.”

“You’re blaspheming, Ralph. I’m a Christian.”

“Oh, Bertha,” he said in feigned exasperation. “You weary me with your narrow-mindedness. Analyse what Jesus said concerning adultery. Case closed.” Abruptly, he changed the subject. “If I were to buy you a present, junior sweetie, what would you settle for?”

“A present,” she thought aloud, glancing upwards. “Oh! That would be nice of you. But why would you want to buy me a present, Ralph?”

“Sweetie, it’s my custom to buy people I like gifts.”

“Please don’t call me sweetie. It doesn’t sound nice to a schoolchild. It’s good you’re buying my sister gifts. You could buy her more. Don’t worry about me. I’m not in the equation.”

“We’ve junior councillors, mayors and presidents. By virtue of being Gillian’s young sister, you’re a junior sweetie to me. It’s not criminal for me to spoil you with gifts, or money for that matter. No strings.”

She turned her head and made a cautionary glance into the passage. “Ralph, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Bertha. Anything.”

“*Anything?* Do you mean *anything?*”

“Yes. By anything I mean *anything.*”

“You shouldn’t talk like that, Ralph. That’s how John the Baptist lost his head.”

“Please spare me your sermons.” He raised his hands theatrically and put them down. “What do you want to know?”

“Are you sleeping with my sister? Tell me the truth.”

Gillian, carrying a copy of *The Herald*, walked into the room, brushing past Bertha who clicked her tongue in anger. Binga gestured at his girlfriend, shrugged and stepped to the bureau to look at the newspaper. Bertha turned and left, closing the door behind her. Her footsteps faded in the passage.

“Oh, what a pleasant shocker,” Gillian said, stopping over the bureau and spreading the newspaper over it. “It’s good to see the two of you talking. At times, I find Bertha a demonic Christian. What did she want?”

“Well, she came to tell me breakfast would be ready in a few minutes. What’s in the paper?”

“A grisly story ... reads like a botched novel. I can’t believe these things are happening in our country.” She pointed at the banner headline:

BODY PARTS AT INCINERATOR, MORTUARY ATTENDANT ARRESTED

He stooped beside her, looking closely at the picture of a handcuffed, drunken man in his early fifties flanked by two detectives in dark suits. The man was in rubber gloves, the refuse collection type, a waterproof apron and an overall. In front of them were two expensive large suitcases. In the background was an obstructed incinerator. The caption read, *Two detectives from the homicide squad flank Mr Dumisani Gobbe (52) arrested early this morning at Bulawayo Metropolitan Hospital with the quartered remains of an unidentified woman. See report for details.*

Binga read the report:

In a bizarre discovery boggling the police, last night at about 2 am, two nurses at Bulawayo Metropolitan Hospital who declined to be named found one of the private hospital's mortuary attendants, who is also the operator of the hospital's incinerator, lying in a drunken stupor near the incinerator. Two large suitcases stuffed with the quartered remains of a yet to be identified woman were on the ground near him.

The two nurses (names supplied) were carting a body to the mortuary, an outer building at the medical institute, when they passed near the incinerator and found the attendant, Mr Dumisani Gobbe (52), a habitual whiskey imbiber, lying on his belly on the lawn in an apparent drunken stupor. Near him were the two large suitcases. A few metres away, the incinerator was blazing. One of the suitcases was open. The nurses discovered quartered remains of a black woman suspected to have been between the ages of twenty-five and forty. There were no clothing items or remnants thereof in the two suitcases, preliminary investigations revealed. The hospital's superintendent, Dr Fabien Chipungu, and his medical staff professed ignorance of the origins of the remains. Dr Chipungu quickly indicated it wasn't the hospital's policy to incinerate such remains. He pointed out that the incinerator was strictly for amputated body parts, fetuses weighing less than a stipulated weight and medical consumables like bandages and gloves. Dr Chipungu, visibly at pains to exonerate his medical staff and assure the public of the hospital's adherence to ethics and government regulations, told the police and reporters that patients who died in the hospital's theatres were neither robbed of their body parts nor incinerated if no one came forward to claim their bodies. He said the hospital handed over unclaimed bodies to the Department of Social Welfare for a pauper's burial, and declined to speculate on the origins of the quartered remains.

It appeared by the time the nurses found Mr Gobbe, who is now in police custody pending investigations when he sobers up, the attendant had already burnt to ashes the unknown victim's head and her right leg. However, preliminary investigations by the police assisted by doctors at the hospital revealed that someone surgically dissected the torso in several places and a number of organs including the heart, both lungs and kidneys, the liver and the womb were missing.

Dr Giovanni Caccia, an Italian consultant pathologist resident at the hospital, observed that the dissections were expert and a post mortem would conclusively reveal someone removed the organs when the victim was alive. He informed the police the victim died on her back less than three hours from the time of the finding.

Compounding the mystery were fragments of a headless terra cotta figurine found in one of the suitcases. Commenting at the scene of the discovery, Detective Sgt Clive Mbuso, who headed the homicide team at the hospital, said the perpetrator carefully peeled off the palms of the victim to frustrate her fingerprint identification. He quickly added the police couldn't rule out organ trafficking basing their argument on the surgical incisions and the missing vital organs, and possible witchcraft because of the fragmented figurine. Detective Sgt Clive Mbuso appealed to members of the public with any information that might assist the police in their investigations to make use of the force's hotlines or visit their nearest police station.

The police took the remains to the government morgue in Bulawayo for post mortem and forensic analysis.

—GBShureya, Herald Reporter, Byo.

“Guys from Scotland Yard would’ve a field day on such findings,” Gillian said, patting him on the back, “In no time a brute, one probably lewd and lascivious... one with significant predatory traits against young women, would face the death penalty.”

“The crime doesn’t sound like the work of a first-time offender.”

Gillian climbed onto the bed and lay face up, spread-eagled. In a Toxic Candy cap, a wrinkled chiffon scarf, blue frill top, shredded denim mini-skirt, slashed black leggings, striped bright legwarmers and ankle boots, and in that posture, she was inviting, obviously not the clothing and posture of a novice in matters erotic. “There should be lots of evidence on the body parts and the suitcases that can point to the perpetrator. Abroad, they’d perform a top-priority search for foreign DNA on the remains, especially in the pubic region and under the nails.” She stroked her groin. “Given the victim’s estimated

age, she was probably raped before she was killed. A brutal maniac is on the loose”

“Everyone is a brutal maniac. The so-called good people know how to project the right characteristics and foster the right attributes in themselves. If our primal beings have to come to the fore, then the days of the Vikings, the Vandals, the Syrians and the marauding Zulus would return. We’re all criminals by nature.”

“You frighten me with your statements.”

“The truth is always frightening. If you learnt everything about anyone or every tribe, you’d recoil. Aghori mystics eat the remains of dead people left on pyres along the Ganges.”

“Tell me everything about yourself. Start from the earliest birthday you remember. I’ve all the time to listen.” She sat up and began unbuckling her boots and loosening their laces.

“My tongue is tied by the Official Secrets Act. Wait for my memoirs when I turn ninety.” He turned to the paper. “The sad part is that the victim could be a relative or someone we know.” He reflected on the report, reading it slowly. “The incisions were made by a surgeon, no doubt. If it were fetishists, then they would’ve removed her genitalia among other things. The report doesn’t mention such. I think the perpetrators left her genitalia intact. I’d want to believe staff at the hospital had a hand in the woman’s killing. Many professionals are stooping low for money.”

Mention of the figurine reminded him of Nomathemba and her faceless pre-Christian figurine. She adored the pagan item. He thought the curving was more than a souvenir to her, but lacked foundation to prove anything. Perhaps she was a voodooist.

His mind quickly diverted to her voluptuous sexuality. Apart from that, he thought about how bizarre the report sounded, and how extremely unfortunate the victim was. If the police and forensic scientists did slapdash work, which was likely owing to Zimbabwe being a developing country without state-of-the-art investigative resources, the woman was never going to be identified. The

Department of Prison Services would eventually assign serving convicts to bury the remains.

Poor, poor woman, he thought, but such was life; from courtship to romance to sex to democracy, everything was murder: someone at some stage had to take advantage of the other. In some African countries, politicians ate the penises of boys to win elections. At a hanging, the hangman was always purposely calm in all his movements and bearing as if the death he would set wasn't violent. A man expert at seduction was deliberately slow and teasing in his caresses, as though at the end he wouldn't rush into the woman in his hands. A matador prolonged the death of the bull as if his presence in the arena was a blessing to the beast. If Saddam Hussein could rise from the dead, he would make the world recall how his bushy beard and hair were deloused, shampooed and shaved, the lengthy medical examinations, the laborious court proceedings in an oak-panelled courtroom, all capped by a violent hanging.

"It makes horrendous reading," Gillian said, placing her boots on the floor. "Maybe her head wasn't burnt. Perhaps it's on its way to Durban or Cape Town. People say South African businesspersons use human heads to bait sharks in the ocean. I don't know how true it is, but people say sharks have diamonds in their bellies."

"I think it's a stupid rumour. If it were true, the Japanese and the Chinese would've the world's largest diamond stockpiles." He sighed and straightened. "One need not worry too much about the victim. She was probably a prostitute."

"The sanctity of life is also recognised in whores."

"Some people realise hookers have no right to live."

Chapter 7

Waking up to find parts of the compound and the footpaths somewhat cobbled with human relics, including skulls, was a bad omen for the compound dwellers. Matipa believed the exhumed bones were hording calamity. When the orderly struck *Madzibaba* Tinashe repeatedly in the chest and blood poured from his mouth and nose, Matipa knew from the prophecy Jatrophia delivered to the elder the man wouldn't make it. When the attack started, Matipa and Ivy latched and locked themselves in the house. Their security and safety suddenly an undocumented cooperative issue, they witnessed the bloodshed through cracks in the door.

From the neighbour's hut, Evans Emedhi emerged with an axe, the size normally used for slaughtering bulls. The stony disposition, that culturing evil allegedly medically explained at Kadoma General Hospital as some rare disease, had left him. The created void had seemingly attracted a catastrophic, warrior-like fervour that powered him with the speed and agility of an athlete.

As *Madzibaba* Tinashe lay kicking, vomiting blood and vainly trying to crawl away, three men in overalls, a mill feeder, the other two lashers, threw caution to the wind and ran to his aid. That was their last dash on earth. They didn't realise the orderly had emerged armed from the hut. Emedhi converged with them at the elder. He swung the axe thrice. The men fell. True to the prophecy, Evans Emedhi was splitting heads open. The gore was unbelievable.

Matipa, who had never seen so much blood all her life, looked away. When she had the nerve to peer out through the crack, she saw blood gushing from the men's heads. The mill feeder and a lasher rolled on the ground, their desperate animation rapidly diminishing. The other lasher, though it appeared the blade of the axe had sank into his fontanel, he struggled to his feet and staggered towards the

killer, too dazed and disoriented to see he was presenting himself to Emedhi who stood in front of him, the axe poised. It swished horizontally. Matipa closed her eyes. Ivy, peering through a lower crack, screamed and held her mouth. When Matipa opened her eyes again, the lasher was on the ground kicking his last. From that distance, it appeared the axe ripped off his left temple and part of his forehead. Someone had to stop the gore.

Gogo Belemina, a redundant woman believed to be from Botswana, appeared from nowhere. Despite her advanced age, she didn't use a walking cane. She approached Emedhi slowly, pointing a reproachful finger at him. His back was to her, the dying men seemed to occupy him. She was saying something, but the noise from sympathisers and screaming women was deafening; many people shouted and screamed at the old woman to turn back. Ivy was one of them, but the old woman was unstoppable. When she was about five metres from the killer, Emedhi suddenly turned and stared at her. Between them, the mill feeder kicked his last.

The old woman grabbed the hem of her long dress, an outdated garment that swept the ground and covered her chipped feet. To everyone's astonishment, she pulled the hem up, exposing her rickety, speckled, emaciated legs. She continued to pull it, exposing her thighs, which were nothing more than crumpled folds of skin pasted on bowed bones. Matipa feared for the tactless woman. Should her nudity prove ineffective, he would kill her. This wasn't some game.

"What's she doing?" Ivy asked fearfully, her eyes riveted on the scene outside.

"It's an old trick. She's trying to shame Emedhi or whatever is in him into backing away from her nakedness."

"My God, that's daredevil of her."

"Someone must stop her."

"Who'd dare? She's already in the shadow of death."

Silence descended on the compound as if any noise or urging would shatter whatever was restraining the possessed man into striking the old woman. She pulled the hem to her chin. Her breasts were craggy sheaths. Except for a string of coloured beads around her waistline, Gogo Belemina had no underwear whatsoever.

Emedhi started towards her, his strides long and determined, raising the axe as he stepped over the lasher's body between them. Matipa thought the woman was attempting to bolt when she turned over, the hem still under her chin, only to expose her shrivelled buttocks to Emedhi. She spread her legs and doubled over.

"Our Jesus," Ivy breathed. "He'll kill her."

Emedhi was a pace from her when two gunshots rang in the air in quick succession, detracting him. Mr Gilchrist Keneas appeared from the right, an upturned pistol in his right hand. Matipa and Ivy simultaneously sighed with relief. The killer froze in a striking posture, so did the old woman in the vulgar stance, but she was like a sacrificial sheep awaiting death.

"Hold it there, Evans!" The mill manager shouted as he approached cautiously, his roving eyes sweeping the grisly scene. He levelled the pistol at Emedhi. "I don't believe this," he said, his eyes sweeping the scene. "You've committed enough crime already! Leave the old woman alone!" He halted when he was about ten metres from the two. "Cover yourself, old woman, and leave the scene. This man isn't himself."

Gogo Belemina straightened to her normal stoop, letting go the hem, which fell to the ground. She faced Emedhi boldly. "Give me the axe. I disgraced myself so that you'd put the axe down. Give me the axe, I order you, or you'll be hanged at Chikurubi."

The axe came down, catching her in the neck. Matipa heard the sound of her collarbone breaking on impact. The woman fell, a yell escaping her lips.

"Back off, Evans!" Mr Keneas ordered, poised to fire. "Back off now!"

Matipa thought the manager was taking too long to put down an animal. Her heart sank when she noticed the pistol was shaking. Twice the manager rubbed sweat from the palm of the hand holding the trigger, and, to her dismay, he kept glancing side-wards in an apparent appeal for backup.

Emedhi tacked the axe under his left armpit. Almost casually, he spat on his palms and rubbed them together. "Have you ever killed, Mr Keneas?" The voice was distinctly that of Bomani. "It takes a lot of resolve to kill." He grinned. "I see you've slaughtered chicken here and there, but you've never killed, not even a stray dog. You won't pull that trigger. This matter has nothing to do with you. The crows are gathering. Tree stump shall bleed sap. Interfere at your own risk."

Mr Keneas looked lost, but remained transfixed.

Emedhi removed the axe from his armpit. He looked at Gogo Belemina at his feet and began to hack the limp woman's head several times amid screams from the peering onlookers. Mr Keneas retreated instinctively as the attack gained momentum. When the last blow beheaded the old woman, the mill manager seemed resolved to shoot the murderer. He walked briskly towards Emedhi running after the scuttling head, which he bludgeoned with the back of the axe. Mr Keneas halted when the axe-killer turned and faced him, his occupation with the head exhausted. Again, the mill manager lacked the courage to pull the trigger and backed away, his face a register of terror. Familiar male voices from the compound urged him to shoot.

"Shoot the bastard!" a man bellowed through a window.

Matipa saw Mr Gilchrist Keneas close one eye, take aim and pull the trigger. The pistol cried four times. Small dusty plumes rose around Mr Emedhi's feet, bringing his gaze down just for a while. Then the deranged man shrieked and sprinted towards the manager, jumbled fearful screams sounding in the compound.

Matipa clicked her tongue in anger when the coloured man turned and ran for his life, the heels of his polished shoes scooping dust in the air. The chase that ensued was dangerous; the once-stony

mystery was swift. Though Mr Gilchrist Keneas appeared macho, he lacked the nerve to shoot. She pitied him. Within seconds, Emedhi was less than six paces behind the pistol-toting man. Matipa feared for the manager every moment of the chase. If he stumbled or let the possessed man overtake him, he was dead.

They ran out of sight behind some huts, and reappeared not long after, retracing their footprints, the gap between them halved. The manager ran towards Matipa's house. The frightened manager loomed in her sight. Matipa shuddered. It seemed he was determined to break into the house for refuge, or it was a way of shaking the demon at her house so that she could squarely face the consequences of what the Mijas hoarded on behalf of Sakis Mine.

Emedhi wasn't going to kill her easily, she told herself and left the door for the section that served as the kitchen in the room. When she returned to the door, she had armed herself with the household's largest enamelled metallic pot. She heard the clatter of Mr Keneas' shoes as he circumvented the house, closely followed by the rather quiet thuds of Emedhi's bare feet. She ran to the window in the bedroom, and was relieved to see the gap between them widening. Mr Keneas fled in the direction of the mine offices. Then they were out of sight again.

Many people were waiting for that break. Those who had taken refuge in the huts of neighbours, which happened to be nearest to them when the slaughter started, emerged and ran to their rightful ones. Those who felt unsafe in their pole and clay huts scurried away in the opposite direction the menace had taken. Matipa knew that many were taking to the surrounding hills and forest, their traditional places of refuge at election time.

When Emedhi reappeared at a trot, he headed to a hut to the left of Matipa's, that of the demonic man's immediate neighbour. Using the axe, he tore down its closed wooden door; a shaky structure of hewn poles nailed to strips of thin planks. Helplessly, she watched him gain entry despite screams and pleas from the family. As it

turned out, refuge in the huts was suicidal; many people came out of surrounding huts and fled in various directions. A bloodied boy, Vurayai, in an off-white T-shirt and a pair of short trousers came out of the hut limping. The adolescent had unsightly injuries in his right thigh and head. He hobbled away, a stricken quarry determined to die away from a predator.

The hapless cries from the hut and their subsequent silencing one after the other were enough testimony to Matipa and Ivy an entire family except for one escapee was dead. As Emedhi emerged from the hut, the hospital garbs bloodied, his wife, Stembile, came out of their hut holding in her right hand a flapping *retso*, the red mediumistic cloth with overlapping sergeant-like black and white arrows and dots of the same colours, and in her left a large corked gourd bearded in the neck. Barefoot and wrapped up in black materials and a red headscarf, a variety of bony charms dangling from her neck, she held out the two items to him and chanted Zulu poetic words. Her appearance in traditional dress brought Emedhi's agitation to a nadir. The cloth seemed to attract Emedhi the way a matador's red cape captivated a bull.

The seeming difference was that the cloth wasn't enraging him, but calmed him as he walked with increasing slowness towards her, his eyes were on the decorated cloth. The material mesmerised him. He continued to walk, his legs wobbling, his pace retarded. He kept his eyes on the cloth, which seemed to drain him of strength, subdue his belligerence and soothe his malice. Something on the cloth was bringing him to heel. When they met, it appeared the stony condition reset.

He dropped the axe as he became weak-kneed and sank to the ground a few metres from the corpses of his victims. Blood was everywhere, so were soiled skulls and femurs and tibias, and other human bones whose names Matipa couldn't remember. It was a ghastly spectacle. As he knelt, Stembile draped the cloth over his head. The material covered his entire upper body. Still chanting, from

the gourd she poured something onto her left palm, which she cast on his covered head. Emedhi shook his head mechanically, his movements diminishing until he was motionless.

Matipa heard Mr Keneas' jeep growl into life and speed away.

Chapter 8

The door opened slowly, drawing Binga and Gillian's attention, and Bertha poked in her head.

"Learn to knock, you little rascal!" Gillian exploded.

Bertha rudely turned her eyeballs inwards, showing them the whites of her eyes. "Why should I knock? Were you about to make love in my father's house?"

"Go say that in a Synagogue," she erupted, swinging to her side and grabbing a boot on the floor, which she flung in a rage at Bertha, but the young sister ducked. The boot hit the wall, missing her head by a few inches.

"Breakfast is ready, love birds, and Dad wants his paper." Bertha laughed, turned her eyes inwards again and left.

"You got yourself a cross between heaven and hell in Bertha," he said. "I'd be happy to take my breakfast in this room, if you don't mind."

"Oh, don't mind the little creature, Ralph. We'll breakfast with everyone. You're more of family now than anything else. Don't forget you need to say goodbye to everybody since you're leaving. It's a very sad day to me. I'll miss you. I love you to bits. I think God gifted me to love no one but you."

"Love," he said ponderously, squinting. "How much do you think love can be bought for?"

"It cannot be bought with money. Are you crazy? It's a feeling."

"Oh," he said in mock surprise. "How come men buy it?"

"Only morons think they can buy it. A man shouldn't be empty of three things. Empty of seed, he becomes impotent. Empty of money, he becomes an undesirable goof. Empty of ideas, he becomes a moron. That's when he becomes a problem and thinks he can buy love. Why do you ask?"

“Forget it, Gillian. My stupid mind, or moronic disposition, says to me I bought your love, or I’m buying you as if you’re some commodity.” He shrugged. “Never mind.”

She rose and climbed out of the bed. “Let’s go for breakfast, dear, before you spoil the day with irrelevant thoughts. Maybe something is bothering you. Please say it, sweetie.”

“Don’t call me *sweetie*. Please.” His breathing became a little heavy. He felt like strangling her and breaking every bone in her body. “You’re a damn bitch, Gillian. Call me a fool... an idiot.” He watched her brow furrow and her eyes dart and water.

“Ralph, what’s got into you? What’s the matter?”

“You’ll never know how much you and your family have ruined me and my family ... my wives and kid.”

She stood akimbo, shaking with emotion. “Ralph. You’re married?”

“I’ve two wives, Gillian. One lives in Bulawayo. The other is a proper homemaker. She bore me a son. His name is Peza. I named him after a summit. I’m not Ralph. I was named after something higher than Peza which I won’t tell you.”

She pointed at the door. “Get out of my father’s house, Ralph!”

“You leave me with no option.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I’ll get out after I kill you and your godforsaken father.”

“I’m not joking, Ralph. I said get out of my father’s house!”

“Don’t call this place *your father’s house*. This is a house of decadence, an atrium to Hades.”

She shook her head and covered her ears with her hands for a while.

When she uncovered her ears, he continued. “You shouldn’t be in a university but a strip-tease club or a brothel.”

“I think you’ve overstayed.”

“How many men have you slept with? Tell me. Eh?”

Her legs shook in their leggings. She sank on the bed, slowly, staring at him, and held her head, finally turning her eyes to the floor.

The door opened and Bertha stepped in. "What's all the noise about?" She glanced at him, searching his face, then at Gillian from whose bowed face teardrops were falling to the floor. "Gillian, my sister, let him go," she pleaded. "You don't have to cry. He'll come back for you. Everyone knows he loves you."

Gillian didn't move. Tears continued to fall between her feet, her shoulders shuddering as she began to whimper. There was a knock and Auntie Roselyn scuffled in. She stared disapprovingly at Bertha and pointed at the door. Bertha frowned and walked out.

Gillian's aunt, Roselyn Mandaza, was a typical African rural woman in a floral crimson headscarf and a long matching old-fashioned rosebud-decorated motley dress hand-sewn in several places. The outfit was now oversize simply because this mother of seven had lost considerable weight in the past few months, according to Gillian. The dress swept the floor. Ever since he saw her at the house, she had never been out of the garment.

Dragging her left leg in her laboured locomotion, the arm of the same side barely swinging, a victim of a severe stroke, which left her speech slurred and her hearing impaired, the aunt looked at Binga and nodded slightly, agreeably, then scuffled to the bed where she sat beside Gillian and put her good arm around her shuddering shoulders. He was glad the aunt wasn't carrying baby Sada. Gillian had informed him at the funeral wake she suffered the stroke a week after she gave birth to baby Sada now about six months old. It shocked him the woman he had thought was past mendicancy had a suckling baby boy. Her hair was largely white. Roselyn Mandaza looked at least sixty to him.

"A few days ago most of us shed tears when we buried Jackson," she began syllable by syllable, loudly inhaling after a few words. "When everything was happening, Ralph stood in our midst as a pillar to the dismay of our enemies who would've wanted Jackson

buried wrapped in a reed mat or a worn out blanket. Translated to beasts, the amount he spent at the funeral was equivalent to a sizeable herd of cattle. The coffin he bought is the type in which government ministers are buried in.”

“Stop it, Aunt!” Gillian barked. “I wish you would leave us alone,” she bowed her head again, the tears now streaming.

“No. I won’t leave you alone until I speak on his behalf though he hasn’t solicited for it. I was going to say, I knew he was going to approach me to talk about marrying you, but custom forbids anyone to talk about marriage in the course of a burial or soon after. As someone marinated in culture, he chose to wait and is still waiting for the appropriate time.”

Binga thought she could enter the Guinness Book of Records as the slowest and most slurred speaker on earth. He folded neatly the newspaper, put it on a far corner of the bureau, crossed his arms and sat on the edge of the piece of furniture, openly pitying Gillian’s aunt for the irony of her stupidity. If he revealed the truth to her, he thought, this woman already with one foot in the grave would drop dead. There’d be another funeral at this house.

Auntie Roselyn went on haltingly. “I’m elderly and experienced in matters of the heart. God gifted me to see a marriage in the offing before many people can sniff it. Though he hasn’t said anything to me in that direction, I wish to assure you, Gillian, beloved daughter of my brother, that Ralph’s action and generosity spoke to us with a unique finesse. His behaviour spoke the language of a refined young man bent on marrying you. Not every suitor goes to these lengths at the funeral of his future wife. In times ancestral, your father could’ve presented you to him as his wife in consideration of the role he played in our time of need. But modern times don’t permit it unless we’d want to horde laughter and jeering.”

“Auntie, please—”

“Don’t cut me short, Gillian, and don’t cry.” There was no improvement in her retarded speech. “Let him go with your

blessings. You still have university education ahead of you. He must return to his people and to his job. When everything is set, he'll present himself and seek your hand in marriage." She looked up at him. "Breakfast may be getting cold. Go to the dining room, Ralph. We'll join you shortly."

He left the bedroom, a part of his mind telling him not to breakfast with leeches but simply to exit wordlessly and drive away in the rental Toyota Hilux. Another part said it was good to bid them farewell and take his leave in a dignified manner, ceremoniously. Yet a domineering voice from belligerent recesses argued the family needed a good lesson. Even if he were to demand his money from these nincompoops, there wouldn't be any recourse because of their glaring poverty. Though the father was a school headmaster and the mother a bursar, it wasn't rewarding in Zimbabwe. The voice told him to thrash everyone except Bertha, leaving them in a bloodbath, and vanish. He was good at vanishing, which was almost like his calling.

As he walked in the passage, he thought about the report of the slain woman in the *Herald* and a possible one that would appear in the same newspaper, and ventured a banner headline:

FAMILY SLAIN FOR PEDDLING DAUGHTER'S CUNT

He thought the newspaper would sell. In a snigger of humility, he entered the dining room; a Gabon viper never displayed its anger, and the venom of the viper killed in five minutes.

Except for Gillian and Bertha, the family sat around a six-chair tubular table with a floral Formica surface. Mr and Mrs Gadaga sat side by side at the furthest end of the table. Near the mother were the Grade 4 twins, Bevan and Ruben. On the father's side was reticent Godwin, the Advanced Level student at Sandringham High School. The family was breakfasting on fried eggs, buttered brown bread and oats porridge, curtesy of the money he had given them for groceries.

He took a vacant chair near the passage door, and was glad he was sitting in a position furthest from Gillian's mother as custom prescribed.

Mr Gadaga cleared his throat nervously and said, "Welcome to the table, son."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your kindness. It's a brilliant morning."

"Yes. The weather is very favourable, but your mother here thinks otherwise."

Mrs Gadaga gave her husband a cautionary eye before looking in girlish embarrassment into the plate of steaming porridge before her, a wry smile on her face.

The husband laughed coyly. "I won't be intimidated. She supposes this is a cursed day for two reasons. The first one is that she's learnt you're leaving us today when, of course, she would like you to stay. The second, she dreamt of a rather peaceful dove suddenly devouring a cluster of bats. Your mother-in-law can be very superstitious despite her education."

He smiled and humbly rubbed his palms against each other. "Duty calls, mother. If Adam and Eve hadn't blundered, we wouldn't have to sweat to live. We're living in a shattered Paradise." He wanted to be blunt and add ruthlessly that if the female organ weren't a sellable commodity, families would be upright enough to aggregate an innocent, ethical community, but decided against it.

Bertha entered with a medium size kettle and an empty plastic bowl, a kitchen towel draped on her forearm. She stood beside him, posed to wash his hands with running water, which reminded him he was in a botched love affair in a time of cholera. He washed his hands quietly and thanked her.

"Bertha, tell Gillian to bring my newspaper."

"Gillian is crying, Father," she answered calmly.

"What do you mean? Why is she crying?"

“Ask your newfound son-in-law, Father. Auntie Roselyn is talking to her.”

Mrs Gadaga looked at her husband. “That’s no way to nurse a stroke. Talking too much might strain her.”

The Father glanced at the roof. “Why is Gillian crying, if I may ask again?”

Binga cleared his throat, a spirit of violence rising within him, his breathing deepening slightly. He took the towel on Bertha’s forearm and began drying his hands. “I don’t know, sir. Maybe emotions are overwhelming her.”

The Father nodded thoughtfully and smiled. “It’s not surprising, son. You’ve been far too kind to us, Ralph. I’m proud of you.”

Again, his wife cast a warning eye on him, but he chuckled good-naturedly and went on, “I’m a gentleman and will be honest with you, Ralph. My close relatives and I take it you mean good to the family. You gave us back our sense of pride and worth. We appreciate your intentions.” He turned to his wife. “Could you please attend to Gillian? Auntie Rosie surely needs relief.”

Mrs Gadaga downed her spoon and walked out of the room in a dignified gaiety. Bertha followed her out. Silence set in apart from the noise of utensils against plates and teeth. Shortly after Bertha returned with the newspaper, she placed it beside her father’s plate of oats, and took the chair her mother sat on. She shoved her mother’s plates away as her brothers passed a teapot and her share of the food to her. Soon she was eating.

On looking at the headline, Mr Gadaga exclaimed in shock and whistled quietly his disturbance. After reading the opening paragraph, he spent the next couple of minutes discussing the bizarre discovery with Binga, advocating for the severe torture of the mortuary attendant when he sobered so that he could reveal to the police all the information they needed. The headmaster feared that if the drunken man had enough money he could bribe the police or prosecutors and walk out scot-free.

Binga added casually, “All corrupt tendencies have their roots in the family.”

“Many parents are failing to raise their children on the straight and narrow,” the headmaster concurred.

Binga said with finality, “Whoever killed the unidentified woman had his reasons, and many people reading the story possibly pity a she-devil who got her due.”

The sound of dragging feet alerted Binga Roselyn Mandaza was coming to join them at the table. Binga thought he would read the aunt’s face for signs Gillian had divulged the reason she was crying, but she walked in zombie-like, her baby strapped with a large towel to her back. Binga noticed the little one was asleep. Mr Gadaga looked at the twins dismissively.

The boys exchanged annoyed glances, and, as if at a cue, cleared from the table with their food and silently left the room. Bertha came round to her as Roselyn slowly sank in the chair where Ruben had been sitting. After holding the chair for her to ensure her safety, Bertha ran water from the kettle on her hands, gave her the towel, served her with food and took baby Sada from her back.

“You burden yourself unnecessarily with a sleeping child,” Mr Gadaga observed.

Auntie Roselyn busied herself with the food, like one in a cocoon. The brother seemed to realise his mistake, the stroke had weakened her hearing, and loudly repeated his observation.

She turned and looked at her brother. “He’s been sleeping fretfully of late,” she said haltingly. “If you put him down he suddenly wakes with a start.”

Bertha was passing behind Binga when the baby suddenly shrieked, jerking.

Binga turned his head and met the baby’s eyes. The baby stared frightfully at him, and began to cry hysterically, his body shuddering, sweat beads beginning to appear on its forehead. Binga smiled vainly at the child and turned to his food. As Binga resumed eating, he kept

a wary eye on Auntie Roselyn to see if she would make a face or somehow tip her brother of the fiasco. However, Bertha remained behind him, which worried him because he couldn't tell if she was making accusing gestures at him. He focused his gaze at the father in an attempt to discern signs on his countenance his daughter was communicating discreetly with him. The man turned to the plate before him.

"The child is crying, Father," she said behind him.

"I can see that, Bertha."

"I told you the child would cry."

"Take the child outside. Don't tell me what you told me. My memory isn't a sieve."

Auntie Roselyn looked about quizzically and asked, "She knew Sada would cry?"

Mr Gadaga chuckled light-heartedly. "Don't take her antics seriously, my sister. There're times when Bertha plays a prophetess depending on which side of the bed she woke up on."

"But, Father—"

"Quiet, Bertha! Take the child outside." He clicked his tongue in anger.

Bertha took the child out of the room.

For some minutes, they ate in silence; the subsiding mezzo-soprano cries of the baby outside an obvious disturbance and irritation to everyone except Binga, until Mr Gadaga stared at his sister studiously and spoke in a loud voice for her benefit, "You look subdued. The baby is fine. I heard Gillian was crying. What seems to have upset her?"

Auntie Roselyn shook her head. Her oral answer was long in coming. "I'd rather not say it. At times, it's not necessary to pronounce everything. To a desert wanderer, a mirage is a very disappointing phenomenon. Perhaps your wife will tell you more."

Mr Gadaga pondered for a while. "You're speaking in riddles, my good sister. I'd be favoured to hear it plainly from your mouth."

“Riddles lighten terrible situations, my poor brother.” She paused, inhaling loudly. “They prepare the heart for devastating bombshells. I wish I could find a burrow to hide in.”

Binga pushed his plate away. “I must thank you for the breakfast and the hospitality, sir. I enjoyed my visit despite stumbling on a funeral. It’s time I took my leave. We’ve a saying: the wise abandon play while it’s still interesting. It’s in your best interest that I leave you now.” He turned to the aunt. “I don’t suppose Gillian is in a position to see me out now. She needs to be alone.” He stood up abruptly, the chair falling behind him.

“Is something wrong, Ralph? Sit down and tell me.”

“It would offend your ears, Mr Gadaga, my good sir.”

Mrs Gadaga burst in fuming and stopped a pace into the room, her nostrils flaring as if she had sniffed ground chillies. She held a stuffed plastic shopping bag in her right hand, which she flung at Binga. It hit him on the shoulder and landed at his feet, spewing familiar clothing and two underpants, his. Mr Gadaga stood up, his face a mask of bewilderment at the intolerable actions of his wife now standing akimbo and quivering with rage.

Binga bent and inspected the other contents in the plastic bag; the suit he wore at the Requiem Mass and the tuxedo he wore at the Bronte Garden Hotel the previous night. Mrs Gadaga’s perfidy infuriated him. He was the wronged and robbed person. Instead of apologising, she was treating him like a dog. This was whorish behaviour; whores were never thankful. No wonder Gillian was bitchy. The traits were an inheritance from her mother.

“I’d have appreciated if you had hurled at me the thousands of dollars I spent at the burial of a non-relative to me. You’re a very ungrateful woman. Unlike you, I’m a very grateful man. I must thank you sincerely for making your daughter the Jezebel she is.”

“Get out of my house, young man!” she commanded.

“For God’s sake, can somebody tell me what’s happening?” Mr Gadaga demanded, banging a clenched fist emphatically on the table.

“I’ll tell you when this bastard is gone. Drive him out, Ronald.”

Maniacal laughter issued from Binga. “I’m no angel,” his voice was composed but edgy. “The days of manna are long over. I toiled for the money I wasted on you. I ventured several fathoms underground to lay my hands on it. I fought like a mastiff bulldog for it. Nothing can stop me from pulverising you for being the miscreants and dogs of dogs that you’re.”

Mr Gadaga drew a rosary from a hip pocket and held it to him. “In the name of all that’s holy, I order you to leave my house!”

Binga held out his right hand, palm facing upwards. “The casket cost over a thousand two hundred dollars. The mortician, mortuary fees and the hearse cost six hundred dollars.”

The parents exchanged bewildered glances.

“Because I was feeding a bunch of gluttons,” Binga went on, “the food bill was exorbitant.”

“This is a private residence, Ralph,” Mrs Gadaga exploded. “You’ve no right at all to disturb our peace! You’re trespassing! If you think we owe you anything you can approach the Small Claims Court!”

“Madam, my name isn’t Ralph. If you knew my capabilities, you’d give me my money now. I can foresee this family being mass-buried.”

“Young man,” Mr Gadaga warned, “you can’t threaten us in our house.”

“Is this family hell-bent on making the headlines tomorrow?”

Gillian, sobbing, appeared in the passage doorway with the Toshiba laptop in one hand and its carrier bag in the other. She hurled both simultaneously in his direction, but towards the roof. The bag landed among the breakfast on the table but the computer shattered on the floor, its electronic components flying in all directions.

Before all the pieces came to rest, Binga was already flashing past Mrs Gadaga, the martial skills he mastered at the Commando Regiment and Wafa-Wafa Military Training Camp coming into play.

Seemingly, he merely ran past Mrs Gadaga in a bid to reach Gillian, and the mother fell to the floor, when in fact an elbow strike to her left temple brought her down. Her husband and son screamed in terror as she slumped to the floor, her dress flaring, her underwear showing. Gillian wasn't swift enough to escape his wrath.

As she turned to flee, he was already a pace behind her, delivering a jab to the lower back of her head behind which was the cavity housing the medulla oblongata, a dangerous pressure point in empty-hands fighting. Gillian yelled and fell slumped in the passage. Binga's anger was unquenched. Straddling her inert body, he turned her over and delivered three quick jabs to her nose, her eyes opening and closing without her volition until she was staring blankly, the last blow breaking the bridge of her nose. Blood gushed from her nostrils.

Inside the dining room, Mr Gadaga was screaming something incoherent about the law and the police, his voice growing, betraying his position: the father was approaching the passage door. Binga left Gillian unconscious in a growing pool of blood. When the father's head appeared in the passage in his blind haste to defend his daughter, the ex-commando was waiting for him in a combative stance.

A snap kick to the belly stopped the father in his tracks and doubled him for a blow to the left temple that sent him sprawling to the floor, vomiting and wetting his pants. The man lay still, his right hand holding the rosary unclenching slowly. Binga knew if the blow hadn't broken the skull and killed him, it would take the headmaster a long while to gain consciousness. If he survived, he would live with significant damage to his brain.

He stood framed in the passage door and looked at Auntie Roselyn. She was still in her chair, but her eyes were wide open and ogling. She leaned forward, gaping. Her good hand reached for her chest as her face landed into the plate of porridge before her. For a

moment, she was inert. Then slowly she keeled sideward and fell from the chair with a thud.

Godwin had vanished, yet the windows were burglar-barred and Binga had militarily blocked the exit to create a mass target. The boy couldn't have escaped, he reasoned. He looked about. Mrs Gadaga lay on the floor, her panties showing. Through the corner of his eye, he saw a movement by the window. Bertha was gasping and staring inside through an open window, too petrified to raise alarm. He knew the fourteen-year old would recover any second from her shock and scream. Baby Sada was in Bertha's hands, his cries now more like meowing than anything else. Binga looked under the table. There he was, Godwin, sitting in an embryonic position and shivering.

"You can come out, Godwin."

Godwin didn't move. Binga straightened and waved casually at Bertha. The girl didn't acknowledge or react in any way.

"Eh, when I drive away, make sure you call an ambulance. Aunt Roselyn and Gillian'll need the most help. The ambulance crew will call the police when they get here. If you call the police, I'll come back and break your neck. Good day, Godwin."

Binga picked his underwear and stuffed it in the shopping bag with the rest of his clothing, and quickly walked out of the room towards the exit. Just then, Bertha's scream tore the general silence in the neighbourhood, but Binga was already out in the sunshine and remotely unlocking the driver's door of the hired vehicle. The car was sparkling clean. Godwin and the twins had risen early and cleaned it thoroughly. He was soon in the driver's seat revving the engine as it roared into life. The car radio automatically came alive with the sound of a traditional jingle, the prelude to the reading of the news. Tyres screeching, the car shot out of the open gate of the Gadagas' residence. He listened to the news:

"A mortuary attendant at Bulawayo Metropolitan Hospital, Mr Dumisani Gobbe, arrested in the early hours of this morning in a drunken stupor, was

found dead in a police detention cell at 8 o'clock this morning. Mr Dumisani Gobhe, aged fifty-two, was found hanging by the neck from the roof. He was in a cell with nine other inmates, all arrested for petty offences ranging from rowdy drunken behaviour to common assault. Police say the suspect made a rope from the seams of his clothing. The Officer Commanding Bulawayo Metropolitan, Senior Assistant Comm. Dingane Hlatshwayo, has issued a press statement that he was setting up a twelve-man probe team headed by a clergyman to investigate the alleged hanging and report to him within a fortnight.

From the house, he drove north towards the twenty kilometre long St Mary's-Maruta highway, the main link between the dormitory town and the city. After several turns and bends, he changed direction and drove southwards towards Chitungwiza Hospital, where he would take the seldom-used Chitungwiza-Mbudzi highway, a less suspected route in the event Godwin defied him. He drove carefully. The streets were full of barefoot children playing alongside rundown open drains spewing raw sewage. People milled about as if every street was a boulevard.

Images of Mrs Gadaga, Gillian, Mr Gadaga and Auntie Roselyn, falling and lying motionless flashed in his mind. He didn't want to bother about them and preoccupied himself by scheming for the recovery of part of the funeral costs. With a meagre twenty dollars in his pocket, he knew he couldn't head straight to Sakis Mine after surrendering the vehicle. Matipa would've a low opinion of him. Worse still, he had overstayed with the vehicle and would've to pay an extra four to five hundred dollars for the breach, unless he dumped the car near the rental firm. If the paramilitary police, with all state machinery at its disposal, had failed to find him in the past seven years, how would a prejudiced car rental firm find him?

It was expedient he laid his hands on a sizeable wad of US dollars before he considered returning to Matipa and Peza. Then he would proceed to Bulawayo for Nomathemba. As Binga drove, he perfected

in his mind his plan to recover part of the money he wasted. He was going to recover it that same day.

Chapter 9

For about half an hour after Evans Emedhi ran out of a neighbour's hut brandishing the axe, bloodshed and mayhem reigned in the mine compound. Danger lurked, in the air and physically, trapping Ivy in the Mugas' house. After the commotion, *Madzibaba* Tinashe and Gogo Belemina lay dead in the open, their bodies bloody and uncovered, so did many people in the relic-littered compound. The senile, peaceful woman was popular with the compound's children, including Peza. The scene was a grisly culmination, almost surreal.

Matipa found it difficult to accept Gogo Belemina and *Madzibaba* Tinashe were dead. The woman lived for five years at the mine courtesy of Mr Artaxerxes Korykos whom she had served as a house cleaner in Harare for three decades. On retirement, which was two years prior to Matipa's coming to the mine, the Greek discovered she had neither traceable siblings nor children of her own, though she claimed to have a dozen children in Gaborone and Francistown, all in management positions. The proprietor decided to accommodate her in the compound as a goodwill gesture. Every month she received money and groceries from the Greek. Lately she was telling those who cared to listen that her children lived in cities she couldn't recall in Canada, Brazil and Moscow, arguing the latter was a country.

The events of the last hour were staggeringly traumatic. Everything had happened within a short space of time. With Bomani Kumanda's presence perceivable, the atmosphere obtaining was apprehensive.

Across the stretch between the houses, Matipa peered at the office orderly. Emedhi was stork-still, his head and upper body draped in a decorated red mediumistic cloth. The axe, a bloodied weapon from his neighbour's hut, lay on the ground near him. Kneeling among the dead, blindfolded, there was mystique about him

and the scene. Stembile chanted Zulu mantras as she paced in front of him, casting some substance on him from a beaded gourd. In black cloths, she looked like a daylight-defying apparition. Her actions and the cloth on Emedhi compounded the mystic air.

Peering out through the crack in the door, Matipa knew that as long as the killer remained in the compound, animated or rock-still, she and the compound dwellers remained beleaguered. The events and distress calls of the past hour still vivid in her mind, she found it preposterous to believe Ivy and she had just witnessed heinous murders. The events rewound in her head, beginning with the nocturnal voices.

For the past hour, Emedhi had remained covered and in the kneeling posture amid five forlorn corpses. Time seemed frozen. No one ventured outside. Stembile continued to chant in Zulu, casting whatever was in the gourd on her husband. Matipa's thoughts were tempestuous. Akar's whereabouts were unknown to her. She didn't know when he would return if ever he would. As his wife, she was his representative and naturally the focal point of the murderous commotion. How long would she play an outsider biding for time to flee Sakis Mine forever? If she emerged from her house, chances were she would rouse the demon. Unlike some people still cowering in their huts, she couldn't afford to adopt a wait-and-see attitude.

"I've a feeling he'll rise and come for me," she said to Ivy. "My husband caused all this."

"This is no time for retrospection. You must run."

"I can't outrun a spirit. He'll overtake me before I reach the edge of the compound. You must help me." She crossed to the double sofa and began dragging it to the door.

Ivy and she piled furniture against the door. As they worked, they regularly climbed on top of the furniture to peer out at Emedhi. The scene outside remained unchanged. Matipa had a gut feeling they were in the eye of a cyclone; the second onslaught was yet to come.

For about two hours, they endured in horrified bewilderment the grisly sight of axed bodies.

She heard the growing wail of an ambulance siren. Then Mr Keneas appeared in his jeep, leading two marked police vans loaded with armed police officers in riot gear complete with shields, a wailing ambulance bringing the rear. The scene was reminiscent of an action movie. The vehicles pulled to a halt in the compound clearing, the makeshift soccer pitch. The mill manager came out of his car and pointed at Emedhi kneeling in the open space amid the bodies. About ten police officers ran towards Emedhi in a widening cow-horn formation, some arming rifles at the motionless man, but the bones on the footpaths mystified and slowed them down. The ambulance killed the siren, but none of its crew disembarked. Stembile turned and began to walk towards the police officers, the red mediumistic cloth and the gourd in her hands.

Through a megaphone, the police sternly ordered her, "STOP, WOMAN! RAISE YOUR HANDS! DROP WHATEVER YOU'RE HOLDING!"

Stembile kept walking.

The order came again, more threatening this time. "THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING! I REPEAT: YOUR LAST WARNING! STOP AND RAISE YOUR HANDS ABOVE YOUR HEAD!"

Emedhi's wife seemed deaf to the order. Matipa feared for her.

A rifle cried once like a bomb going off. Stembile dropped the items and held her right thigh. She fell to the ground. Behind her, Emedhi removed the cloth draped on his head, stood up and stared in horror and grief at his stricken wife, his hands coming to rest on the crown of his head. Stembile reached for her items and struggled to her feet. She staggered towards the armed men, now cordoning their huts in a closing net. Blood oozed from her thigh. Emedhi turned slowly, but suddenly dashed into his sleeping hut. He slammed the door shut as volleys of bullets hit the doorpost and the

area around it. Dust rose from the stricken wall. Momentary silence prevailed.

Stembile kept advancing, limping towards the police officers. A rifle cried again. She jerked her left leg, which buckled immediately and she sank to the ground, again dropping the items. Two police officers ran to her, beckoning to the ambulance crew. Three paramedics emerged from the back of the ambulance, two of them pulling out a stretcher. The third ran to Stembile, a medical box in his hand. As the officers checked her for weapons, he squatted beside her and examined her injuries. The other crew arrived with the stretcher. The paramedics gave her first aid and strapped her to the stretcher, one plugging her to a graduated translucent bag with an intravenous fluid. They ferried her to the ambulance.

When Stembile was in the vehicle, Matipa turned her attention to the rest of the action. The police officers' aimed their rifles at the hut harbouring Emedhi. She feared for the orderly despite herself. The rifles and the combative men looked lethal.

"COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!" the officer behind the megaphone ordered.

The hut's door remained closed.

"MR EMEDHI, YOU'RE INVITING DIRE CONSEQUENCES! COME OUT WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR! THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING!"

Two police officers ran to the hut from different directions and threw teargas canisters through its two ventilation gaps that also served as windows. The men ran back to their positions. For a while Matipa thought the canisters had stalled or something. Then thick greenish smoke spewed out of the hut through gaps in the door, the ventilators and the fissures where the grass-thatched roof joined the wall. The colour of the plumes darkened as the spews increased in intensity.

Emedhi must come out, Matipa thought, or he risks suffocating in the plumes.

Ivy and she coughed and sneezed uncontrollably when the gas diffused to them, so did a number of neighbouring dwellers. The door to Emedhi's hut remained shut. The smoke took time to clear, but riot police held their cordon and kept their rifles poised. A paramedic ran to the motionless bodies on the ground and checked them for signs of life, all the time shaking his head as he moved from one victim to the other. He ran back to the ambulance.

When the fumes waned, two police officers in oxygen masks ran to the hut and kicked down the door. Trapped smoke spewed out through the doorway. When it cleared, Matipa eyes widened in shock and her lower jaw dropped. She saw Emedhi's legs in the striped hospital trousers and his bare feet suspended about half a metre from the dung-smeared floor, lifeless and swaying gently. An overturned chair lay on the floor. The man had hanged himself. Lights flashing and the siren blaring, the ambulance sped away with Stembile.

Ivy and she began removing the furniture they had placed against the door. Many people came out of their dwellings. The two came out of the house afterwards. The horror was agonizing. Women broke down crying. People looked at her with accusing eyes. Ivy refused to look at the bodies at close range. She ran away towards the offices sobbing like a child. For many hours, Emedhi's body dangled and the slain lay desolate. A police detail radioed Kadoma Central Police Station, made a report of the incident, and asked for the despatch of a homicide team.

Matipa just stood transfixed, stunned, until detectives, four men in business suits, arrived in an unmarked car. The new arrivals were the only ones who looked indifferently at the corpses and the bones strewn on the footpaths. The mill manager took them on a tour of the crime scene. When they emerged from the Emedhis' sleeping hut, Mr Gilchrist Keneas brought the leader of the detectives to Matipa and introduced him as Sgt. Ronny Tizora.

“What weapon did the suspect use to strike *Madzibaba* Tinashe?” the sergeant asked, looking at Matipa and then at the manager. “Can you show me the blunt object he used?”

“He was hammered with a clenched fist,” Matipa said.

The sergeant and his team were astonished. Many people, including Matipa, narrated the attack to him without variation. The police officers found everything bizarre.

On learning about the root precedent to the mysteries murders, the coming to Sakis Mine of one Bomani Kumanda on 29 November, Sgt Tizora and his men took Matipa to her house and interviewed her in her sitting room. The men sought to know why relics were everywhere including her threshold, and the motive for the murders. She tried to answer all the questions as faithfully as possible, beginning with the prophecy of a demon in human form. The detectives found her responses outrageous.

She liked their soberness, and business-like approach, though at times they probed her with questions that unsettled her. Finally, he resorted to a question he had posed earlier, “Where’s your husband?”

“He’s visiting his parents in Matabeleland,” she lied.

“I suppose the gravity of this incident and the kidnapping of your son warrant you to get hold of your husband.”

“Sir, the area he travelled to is rural. It has no mobile network service.”

“Why was Bomani looking for your husband?”

“I’ve no idea, detective. That’s the truth.”

He looked at her dubiously. “Can I’ve your husband’s cell number?”

“He’s yet to buy a mobile phone, sir.”

“That’s unbelievable. When did your husband leave this compound?”

“Around half past five on the afternoon of 16 November.”

“Do you know his girlfriend?”

She shook her head.

“I’m warning you not to play with our minds. Did you ever sleep with the so-called *demon in human form*?”

Her face contorted. “I’d never seen or heard of Bomani before.”

“Why do I get the impression Bomani is Peza’s father?”

“That’s absurd.”

“It’s not our first time hearing the name Bomani,” Sgt. Tizora said. “He’s on our *Most Wanted* list for about eight cases of immolation and over twenty-five cases of murder, all committed during robberies for precious stones in the Chiadzwa diamond fields. He’s also committed crimes on many gold claims in the country. At the height of the invasions of the diamond fields by over thirty thousand people, Bomani and his greyhounds killed about ten illegal diamond diggers for their diamonds. The police failed to track him in the forests and mountains of Chimanimani. The area is like southern Afghanistan.”

“He said he would return, Sergeant,” she reminded him.

“No ways, Mrs Muja. He knows the odds against him. Bomani isn’t a simpleton.”

The sergeant went on to denigrate senior police officers at the Venice Mine Police Post for failing to deliver their duties with expediency, castigating the evident substandard work they did when they came to Sakis Mine.

“Procedurally,” Sgt Tizora explained, “Venice Police Post was supposed to generate a Case Notification Report in the form of a radio signal to Kadoma Central Police Station for onward transmission to the desk of the Officer Commanding Kadoma. If someone had done that, we would’ve known by the next day Bomani and his team were in the Sakis-Venice area. We would’ve quickly shown his composite on all TV channels, set roadblocks on the Harare-Bulawayo highway, warned the concerned communities a dangerous killer was in the locality, and mounted a manhunt.” Now it was too late, the sergeant bemoaned, hinting the killer had to resurface somewhere by committing another crime for them to have

a pursuance lead, an anticipation he said toyed with his detective calling. “We’re concerned about your son,” Sgt. Tizora went on. “If your boy is still alive, we must find him. But I don’t think the courts will prosecute Bomani for kidnapping your son.”

“Why is that so? He *kidnapped* my son.”

“Kidnapping is a lesser charge than multiple counts of murder. Once we arrest him, the High Court will try him for murder and condemn him.”

“But is it too late for you to look for my son?” Matipa pleaded.

“The kidnappers have a nine-day lead. We’ll need every known detail of the matter before we can begin a search or a manhunt. I find your responses and accounts incoherent and outlandish. Come to our offices at Kadoma Central at 2 pm tomorrow. Bring some of Peza’s latest photographs. I guess the violence today shook you so much that you can’t be reflective of the events of 29 November.”

“I told you everything I know, sir.”

“Let’s have a good sit down away from this mine. A different setting may enable you to recall everything Bomani said to you. We also need to figure out where he could’ve taken Peza and why he wanted your husband, and if this Binga he was looking for is indeed your husband.”

“I’ll be in your office at 2 pm tomorrow.”

Det. Sgt Tizora and his men left her house.

Chapter 10

Bomani Kumanda was completely naked and smeared in ashes, soil and charcoal. Tears mottled his cheeks, having washed away the dirt as he cried to his *Gule Wamkulu* gods and spirits to mount a palpable presence at Sakis Mine and will Binga to return to his family. Swearing and pointing in the direction of Malawi where the burnt remains of his father lay buried, he promised them menstrual blood.

The heat was sweltering. A northerly wind hissed through the boughs of a cluster of tall, eucalyptus trees. Bomani Kumanda sat still on an unmarked tombstone in one of the numerous unkempt and unfenced graveyards in the woods around Patchway Mine. The graveyard was to the south of the mine. He was in a small clearing surrounded by overgrown bushes and tall grass, above which was the whizzing eucalyptus canopy.

From the tallest tree hung a red cloth, one of many in the vicinity, a warning to members of the public the cemeteries dotted in the forests around Patchway Mine were out of bounds to ordinary people. When he arrived in the area a week ago, he had carefully scouted for an appropriate site for his team's camping, going round the semi-defunct mine of about two hundred workers. In the forests around the mine were neglected clusters of unfenced graveyards.

Clusters of rustic graves ranging from two to about twenty fretted a large expanse of land around the mine complex in all directions. Bomani settled for a cluster with thirteen graves, mostly earthen mounds and cairns. The nearest mine building, which was the warehouse, was over a kilometre away. When he looked in the direction of the mine above the trees, he saw only the overhead wheels on the headgear over Pioneer Shaft.

An earthen bowl on smouldering embers was between his feet. The juju in the bowl, ground herbs and twigs, the skull of a rodent

and a viper, two feathers from an owl, were also smouldering, their smoke most of the time rising vertically in the still air of the confinement. He willed the smoke to drift in the direction of Sakis Mine, which it seldom did, bringing elation to his heart. With a stick, he kept poking the embers.

Residents of the mine understood the red cloths meant the presence of *Gule Wamkulu* camps and avoided the areas with the 'flags'. Beginning on 12 December, the community, mostly people of Malawian and Zambian decent, knew that the Zimbabwe National *Gule Wamkulu* Tournament would kick off in earnest in the mine's football field, an event that attracted *gule* practitioners from across the country and foreign tourists. The dancers took residence in the graveyards in preparation. Bomani and his group were among them. The period between now and 12 December was for ancestral prayer and rituals, every team performing theirs in confidence among the graves of its choice.

However, Bomani wasn't here for the tournament. This would be his rendezvous with Binga, among the dead, among other *gule* practitioners, a domain where no police officer would set foot. Patchway was about fifty kilometres from Sakis Mine in a straight line.

From the position of the sun, Bomani deduced the hour to be midday of 9 December. By Christmas, he knew he would've hooked his quarry by the palate of his mouth, or killed him.

He had been at the ritual since midnight, and would stop when the gods gave him signs they had heard him. So far, there was none, though the presence of a swarm of pied crows was encouraging. The birds arrived in pairs and small parties, noisy and gliding, only to perch on distant trees and stare in his direction. More had come, from all directions. At some cue, they'd leave the trees with a loud flap of wings and circle around him before perching again to stare curiously at him. Then one would fall to its death near him, a sign the spirits had heard him. He was a patient man. Juju demanded patience.

In the meantime, he occupied himself with recollections of his mother, Cheruna, and his father, Cholooka. Both were deceased. Of course, Cholooka was the first to depart when he fell in the fire fourteen years ago. Bomani recalled the day he returned from Kasungu, the day he discovered his father in the fire. He clenched his fists as he relived the last moments of his father, the stench of burning flesh, the gurgling sounds that escaped from Cholooka's mouth and his left eye that popped out and fell into the fire. He remembered coming to his senses and dragging his father outside and covering him with a blanket to smother the flames and conceal the horror. The man had continued to jerk, convulse and smoulder under the blanket until he said "*Uho-u*", which Bomani found to be the final seal to a diabolical existence. It troubled him a man who claimed to be Christian had failed to call upon Christ at the last hour. Perhaps he hadn't converted and so had rightly called out to flatter the gods of Lake Malawi to pave his passage to a dark hereafter.

He had found it difficult to pity Cholooka. Ironically, his mother had stared nonchalantly at her dying husband, a man who had neglected her until she was a collection of bones. The dead man was his father despite the old man's shortcomings. Custom demanded someone had to wail to announce his death. With his mother seemingly lost in another world, who else could do it accept him? Bomani had screamed and wailed, his voice reaching every corner of Chapola Village. He cried that his dear father, a good man, was dead. That death was shameless. That he wished he had died in his father's lieu. When the immediate neighbours rushed to the homestead, they found him rolling in the dirt besides his father's body. A man who uncovered Cholooka's head to verify if indeed his neighbour had died recoiled at the horror and fled the homestead. So did his wife. The man screamed on top of his voice that Bomani had killed his father, which kept many people outside the homestead perceived as a crime scene.

Cheruna had continued to stare with sunken eyes. From her blank face, he could tell she was neither capable of vouching for her son's innocence or incriminating him. If he weren't careful enough, the State would try him in Lilongwe or Blantyre for the murder of his father and hang him. He wailed his innocence, maintaining he had found his father in the fire and God was his witness, until three elderly Jehovah's witnesses arrived. They picked him from the ground and begged him to compose himself.

A swelling gathering outside the homestead shouted that he had killed his father, trying to convince the elderly men to leave a murderer alone to face his fate. Many shouted that feuding had characterised his relationship with his father. Some said Cholooka had long disowned him because he was a failure. A wailing woman shouted Bomani returned to kill his father to inherit the Massey Ferguson tractor, the brick-house and swelling herd of cattle. Bomani wished he hadn't returned to the village. He was better off penniless and an object of pity at the urban school.

One elder led him into the sitting room of the brick house while two went outside to reason with the villagers. When they sat in a sofa, the elder said, "I'm sure you didn't kill your father."

Bomani felt relief but remained mum.

"I want to assure you the elders are taking it upon themselves to exonerate you in the eyes of the community."

About thirty minutes later, the grace of God prevailed, the oratory capabilities of the elders won the day. The anger subsided, the villagers convinced to focus on mourning a fellow villager in earnest and refrain from taking the law into their own hands. The elders stressed there were chances he was innocent, equal in measure to those he had killed his father, pointing out none of them had witnessed the alleged murder. The bottom line was that justice was scrupulous and always prevailed.

Many people gathered at the homestead for the customary vigil before burial the next day. In the absence of a mortuary, it was the

norm to bury the deceased in the shortest time possible. The village Chief, Chief Chapola, arrived to keep vigil and pay his condolences. He was a simple man in ordinary clothes and a worn out fedora. More Jehovah's Witnesses, women, men and teenagers came. Bomani was happy to see them, especially when they assured him his father had converted; and therefore wasn't "dead" or a candidate for Hell, but was like a baby fast asleep in God's bosom.

"But there's something you must know immediately," a church elder offered, holding Bomani's hand and leading him outside the sitting room. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you as if there's something positive to be reaped from breaking bad news."

He followed the elder curiously, his heart beating faster with the advent of every second. Was the news sadder than his father's death, he wondered. From the direction of the family's cattle pen came the sound of barking and growling dogs. Bomani guessed dogs were fighting over a bitch in heat.

The man stood with him in an open area out of everyone's earshot. "Brace yourself, son. Last night at about midnight, your father went berserk and hacked all the twenty Brahman heifers and their bulls with an axe. He torched the Fergusson too. We couldn't restrain him. We were afraid he could axe us too. I'm sorry."

Bomani ran to the grass-thatched shed his father had erected specifically for the tractor. The shed and the tractor were fire-gutted. He ran to the cattle pen and peered inside. It held nothing apart from carcasses. Packs of village dogs were feasting over the beasts.

In a daze of confusion and disbelief, he staggered to the house in time to find sympathizers taking furniture from the sitting room and the kitchen to create room for as many mourners as possible inside the house. Men, including Chief Chapola, his aide and his bodyguard armed with a truncheon, sat in the sofas and chairs placed outside. More people poured in, men carrying wooden stools, women reed mats and goatskins. Though closest male relatives kept vigil with the corpse in his parent's bedroom, no one entered the pole-and-dagga

hut in which Choolooka met his death. People believed the spirit of death was in the hut, which required exorcism. The corpse should've lain in state in the sitting room, but the stench of burning flesh disturbingly lingered on it.

Men brought large logs and small tree trunks to the homestead and lit two bonfires almost the size of pyres outside the house, one for the close male relatives who couldn't stand the corpse's stench, village dignitaries including Chief Chapola and his entourage of two, the other for ordinary villagers, friends and distant relatives and the youth. The fires illuminated the lugubrious faces of the people who sat on benches, stools, chairs, logs, tins and sofas around them. They also lit a significant area of the yard. Where the light faded into darkness, shadows danced. Some mourners watched the shadows sceptically, often turning to look over their shadows.

He recalled women sitting with Cheruna in the kitchen of the brick-house. They sang Christian songs in hushed tones, of Jesus resurrecting Lazarus, of life returning to dry bones in a desert, of the final conquest and shackling of Death itself after the return of the Son of Man. Gradually Cheruna came to her senses. In the lull between songs, he overheard her enquiring from the sympathizers the reason for the gathering. Her wailing rented the evening when she learnt her husband had died. Interrupting her cries with wanton questions on how she would cope, she mourned him as if he was the most acceptable and loving husband who ever walked this earth. Most women broke down and lamented with her.

In the master's bedroom, Bomani found sixty US dollars in an envelope bearing the seal of a bureau de change in Lilongwe. He gave money to well-wishers who immediately travelled on foot and by bus to notify more relatives and family friends in surrounding villages and towns. That evening, he drafted a telegram to Benita in Italy notifying her of their father's death, how it had devastated him and the neighbours, and congratulated her on finding a lifetime partner, suggesting she postpone the wedding to allow for mourning and the

return of normalcy to their lives. He gave the telegraph to a neighbourly teenager for despatch at their nearest Post Office the following day.

At about midnight, four masked *Gule Wamkulu* dancers in full regalia arrived at the homestead, causing a stampede. They ran about shouting “*Uho-ul! Uho-ul!*,” some dashing into the hut, some stepping inside the packed kitchen and sitting room, mourners clamouring out of their way. Dozens of people screamed and ran for their lives, many falling. Scared mourners jammed doorways but managed to squeeze their way out, but there was nowhere to run; more masked dancers stood in the shadows outside. Many trapped mourners fell on the ground as a sign of reverence and submission. Chief Chapola kept his composure, he too being a *gule* practitioner by virtue of being the village leader, a custodian of the village’s cultures and practices.

Inside the house, a scuffle ensued between elders of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and masked men. On the spur of the melee, Mr Umi Chin’ono’ono and Joseph Chimsima, two elders from a feared *Gule Wamkulu* stable, entered the homestead. Both men always carried wands made from the tails of hyenas, and were expert at cursing and swearing. The masked men exited and went to stand in the shadows around the house, their cries waning and finally dying. Silence descended on the homestead. Scores of people rose from the ground and dashed into the house, cramming the rooms. Bomani was among them.

The Chief, accompanied by his bodyguard, met the two men and conversed quietly with them for some time after which he sent his aide to summon the elders of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. For the greater part of an hour, the parties, the Chief seemingly chairing, traded accusations. Bomani heard the wizards arguing Cholooka had to be buried with full *Gule Wamkulu* rites because he had died a member of their secret cult, as such, custom stipulated they rendered the last rites to one of their own. The elders, five of them, countered the claim was void because the deceased had converted, reiterating

Cholooka was a practising Witness and had died one, which meant he wasn't the cult's business. Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima maintained Cholooka died *gule*. The five elders laughed scornfully and repeated he died a *new creation... a son of God*.

Chief Chapola, though he was *gule* and could've easily taken sides with the wizards, was a man of equity. He gestured for the two parties to sit down, the Witnesses to his right and the stable leaders to his left. The parties found stools and sat. His aide brought him the sofa he was sitting in previously. The Chief sat in a vintage position as adjudicator between the warring parties, and whispered something at length to his stooping aide. The aide, Mbewe, straightened and crossed to the house. He led Cheruna out, two women assisting her. One of the women spread a goatskin near the Chief on the side of the church elders. Cheruna sat on the skin, her legs outstretched before her, the women flanking her.

Mbewe addressed the mourners. "Mr Cholooka is dead," he began.

All along, Bomani had watched everything through a window. When the aide began talking, his voice booming, Bomani came out of the house and stood on the veranda among other terrified mourners. He didn't want to miss a word.

"Like I said, Mr Cholooka is dead," Mbewe repeated. "His body lies in the brick-house as I speak, a clear testament to us all of his passing on to the land of spirits which awaits all of us. Now he's gathering his belongings for the revered journey yonder, and we can aid him by paying our last respects in humility and profound respect. We should celebrate his life, as we knew it, a befitting remembrance and farewell to a village notable. If Cholooka wasn't a man of substance, a man who lived in peace with the rest of us, Chief Chapola wouldn't have graced this occasion."

Many heads nodded.

"The words I'll speak aren't mine," continued Mr Mbewe. "Once again, I'm honoured to be Chief Chapola's mouthpiece at this solemn

gathering when we're all mourning the untimely tragic passage of a fellow villager. If a man was a Moslem at the time of his death, Imams or sheiks must preside at his funeral for his burial to be an Islamic pleasure to Allah. Do I speak the language of man?"

Many mourners granted acknowledgement. From the surrounding darkness, came "*Uho-u*" cries.

Bomani edged closer to the hearing and sat on the ground where he could see his mother on the goatskin. The village was persecuting her at her husband's funeral vigil, yet he couldn't do anything. Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima killed their opponents with juju, or sent masked *gule* dancers to abduct their enemies whom they detained in remote graveyards.

"Thank you," the aide continued. "By the same token, I must emphasise, a person who meets his death after converting to Christianity would be eternally honoured if their pastor and church led the funeral proceedings. Do I still speak the language of man?"

The same sounds rang in the homestead.

"The same honour goes for those who died members of *Gule Wamkulu*."

An "*Uho-u*" hubbub swallowed the restrained concurrence of many of the people in the homestead.

"Why do I say things alienable to a proper eulogy befitting Mr Cholooka? I say these things because of a situation that can turn ugly in the absence of reason and a consensus. As the body lies in state, the dead man's spirit hovering over us and this homestead, two parties are laying claim to Mr Cholooka's allegiance to them or their beliefs at the time of his death this afternoon." He gestured towards the five Christian elders. "The Jehovah's Witnesses here say he was in their fold. They seek to preach, or, according to them, witness to you their beliefs and pray for Mr Cholooka's soul to repose in peace." He stopped briefly and gestured at the two cult elders. "*Gule Wamkulu* elders are adamant he was a member of their secret society and wish to preside at this vigil and his burial tomorrow. However, I'm glad to

announce both parties are ready and willing to bow to reason and facts.”

Expressions of shock rippled through most of the mourners, some clicking their tongues in anger at the absurdity of Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima's claim.

“Chief Chapola, by the power vested in him by the Government of the Republic of Malawi, will hear the parties' claims in your presence. He'll make a ruling tonight that'll put the matter to rest. If the two parties had arrived here at the same time, I'd have tossed a coin to determine who would speak first. The Jehovah's Witnesses were the first to arrive. You all saw them. Whoever is their leader here'll speak first.” Mbewe sat on a stool besides the Chief.

A hoary man in a wrinkled two-piece suit rose among the bunch of elderly Witnesses, saluted the Chief and thanked him for his equity, realising the leader could've simply made a decree in favour of the secret society since he was a member of the same. “I don't stand here to please man or pleasure the ears of man with oration. Men-pleasers are enemies of Jehovah.”

“We ask you not to give us a sermon,” Mbewe interjected. “We're not here to convert but to pay our last respects to Cholooka.”

“My apologies, Chief Chapola, I found a preamble in order,” the elder said humbly, slightly bowing towards the leader. “Allow me to continue. Hallelujah! Brother Cholooka is a man now in the hands of Jehovah. He repented and renounced traditional worship, all forms of dancing and spirits two months ago. He gave his life to Christ, attended lessons and fellowshiped with us. It's possible he delved into so many things before he repented. Let no one hold his soul to ransom for the errors and sins he committed in his days of darkness. A clear sign of his repentance is his forgiveness of his son, Bomani, among us tonight on the strength of his father's conversion.”

The cluster of Jehovah's Witnesses clapped their hands in appreciation.

The elder went on. "Brother Cholooka told us he had cursed and disowned his son and sought to make peace with him. Forgiveness being prayer, we encouraged him to do so. A week ago, Brother Cholooka wrote to his son and sent him money. Bomani is here because Brother Cholooka converted. Thank you, Chief Chapola. I rest our self-explanatory case." He sat down.

Mbewe pointed in the direction of the cult leaders.

Chimsima rose and waved his wand. He was a tall, bristly man with cataract-clouded eyes. "*Uho-u! Uho-u! Uho-u!*" he shouted, turning in different directions.

Most of the mourners laughed scornfully, but the masked dancers in the darkness responded spiritedly, shouting "*Uho-u!*" for several seconds.

The cult leader went straight to the point. "I want to agree with the pastor or whatever his designation is. Indeed, Cholooka gave his life to Jesus and became a *Watchtower*; we all saw it. He went door-to-door distributing *Watchtower* leaflets and books. Chief Chapola here saw it." He looked over his shoulder. "*Uho-u!*"

"*Uho-u! Uho-u! Uho-u!*" the cries came.

"*Nyan* isn't against anyone who gives his life to Jesus. We don't have a policy that says once *gule* always *gule*. However, if one from our ranks decides to forfeit his destiny by renouncing *Gule Wamkulu* and giving his life to Jesus, we expect that person to surrender all *nyau* masks and curios in his possession. Those who fail to do so die. That's why Cholooka is dead."

People stared at him fearfully.

"I stand here to tell you the dead man didn't surrender our things. A person can choose to become anything, but one renounces *nyau* only through the surrender of curios. We'll bury him tomorrow, we're his family." Chimsima sat down.

Chief Chapola stood up almost simultaneously with his truncheon-armed bodyguard. He adjusted his fedora and spoke. "I come from a lineage of just and fair men. Notwithstanding my

leading *nyau* as a community leader, I'll speak from a neutral perspective. We heard the arguments. Both parties are adamant. Cholooka cannot speak for himself. Maybe he was neither a Witness nor *gule* and could be laughing at us wherever he is." He paused thoughtfully. "The decisive question is: Is there proof the deceased didn't surrender the curios?" he paused again and stared at Cheruna. "If this homestead is searched thoroughly, won't we find zoomorphic masks and *nyau* paraphernalia?"

All eyes turned to Bomani's mother.

"You're the wife," the Chief appealed to her. "Should I order this homestead searched?"

Cheruna lowered her eyes and mumbled something.

"I order you to speak up!" the Chief's voice was threatening.

Cheruna scribbled on the goatskin. "There's a bagful in the granary."

Bomani couldn't believe his ears. Shocked gasps issued from the mourners. Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima sprang to their feet and waved their wands in jubilation. The masked men in the peripheral darkness made their singular cries. The cult leaders resumed their seats. Order returned.

"You're an honest woman," the Chief said. "If there's something else you think we must know this is the opportune time to say it."

"I don't have blood in my veins now," she volunteered. "I don't think I'll last long." She bowed her head and hesitated, her lips quivering. "He licked my menstrual blood daily."

A disgusted murmur ran through the gathering.

"I think that's beyond the scope of this hearing," Chief Chapola ruled. "That's the province of witch-doctors and witch-hunters. This is my ruling: I decree *Gule Wamkulu* led by Mr Umi Chin'onon'ono and Joseph Chimsima to take over proceedings from the moment I sit down until burial. The same will also preside at his memorial ceremony. Whoever dares stand in their way faces immediate eviction

and permanent banishment from this village. I thank you all.” His bodyguard and he sat down amid an uproar of *Uho-us*.

Chin’onon’ono stood up. He was a swarthy man overburdened by numerous beads and charms around his neck, which he wore on top of his shirt like honorary medals. “The gods of this land bless our Chief. If I still had a nuptial daughter, I’d have presented her to you, Chief Chapola, as a gift and a living reminder of the fairness and equity you exhibited to us all. However, while we accept this favourable decree, we wish it known to everyone here that *Gule Wamkulu* cannot take over proceedings because we don’t know what prayers the Jehovah’s Witnesses have uttered to their God. I don’t think Choolooka would hear me if I called out his name now. Let the Christians go ahead and bury our member. We’ll take over at a suitable time. Allow us to take our leave, Chief Chapola. *Uho-ul*”

The mystic repertoire sounded again around the house. Chief Chapola nodded. Chin’onon’ono and Chimsima walked out of the homestead, all the masked men following. Mourners sighed in relief when Chief Chapola rose, gestured to the Watchtower elders to preside, and took his leave with his entourage.

The rest of the night was peaceful but hectic for Bomani and two men, the villager’s backyard carpenters who worked tirelessly until morning, demolishing the homestead’s only wardrobe unit and making a coffin out of it by kerosene light in the back of the house.

As they pulled apart the unit, Bomani heard elder after elder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses preach to the mourners that there was no other Paradise besides this world. That it was time for sheep and lions to lie down together. That celebrating Christmas and belief in the Holy Trinity were pagan. That the Watchtower was the only true Church as shown by its power that toppled the Chief’s pagan decree.

By daybreak, the coffin was ready. From one angle, it looked like a large toolbox, from another like a beehive or a well-ventilated paw-paw crate. To someone who lived in an admirable brick-house and had a daughter in Europe, the coffin was a humiliation. Bomani

couldn't have done more. The amount he received from his father when he was in Kasungu paid off some debts and his bus fare. A cable to Benita in France wouldn't take time, but sending money from overseas to Lilongwe would. It took about a week for someone in a village to receive money by telegram, yet they had to bury Cholooka within twenty-four hours or his body would decay.

By ten o'clock, they had buried Cholooka, together with a stuffed hessian old sack no one dared open. Impressions of its contents on its edges were suggestive of masks and gourds, among other things. Cheruna felt the *Gule Wamkulu* curios in the sack might spell their dissolution and they had to bury them in the same grave as their owner.

One of the elders said a graveside prayer before and after the burial. Cholooka's elder brother, Pazomba, a gardener from Dowa, a man of a few words, thanked everyone for their assistance in burying his young brother. The funeral ended. Most people went to their homes. Bomani and a few relatives headed home to kill time and wait for the morrow when they'd have to make the inaugural visit to the grave at daybreak to see if witches hadn't tampered with it.

At midnight before the inaugural visit, the sound of *Gule Wamkulu* drumbeat, violent, sophisticated and invoking, the sound of four mettlesome drums beating in the graveyard where they had buried Cholooka's body, awakened Bomani and the handful of relatives remaining at the homestead. The graveyard was between Chapola Village and Lake Malawi. Spirited cries rang from the cemetery. The noise and the cries continued until dawn. Everyone in the house stayed awake until morning, the elderly expressing fears Chin'onon'ono, Chimsima and members of their cult were performing rituals at Cholooka's grave.

As the sun broke from the eastern side of Lake Malawi, Bomani and five of his relatives made their way on a footpath to the graveyard. Citing poor health, Cheruna stayed at the homestead with two other female relatives. Bomani, expectant of an ambush by the

cult members, walked behind everybody. Pazomba leading, the party was tense and silent. Behind Pazomba was Auntie Chaiwe, Cholooka's sister. She carried a large gourd of water for sprinkling on the grave to soothe her brother's journeying soul.

As they approached the graveyard, Pazomba slowed down, slowing everyone in turn. Fear played havoc with him. Members of the party craned their heads to see what was ahead. They saw nothing but the usual overgrown mounds of earth and piles of rocks, which were the old graves. While some graves bore cheap brush-painted metal plates stating the deceased's name and surname, date of birth and death, and "RIP", most of the graves were unmarked. Circumventing graves, the party spread a little. As they approached Cholooka's grave, Pazomba stopped abruptly. The gourd of water slipped from Auntie Chaiwe's hands, shattering on the ground.

Cholooka's coffin lay empty and broken a few metres away from where they buried him. The clothes they buried him in, an old two-piece suit, a shirt and necktie, were on top of the dishevelled grave. About four metres away was a fresh grave under a tree bearing a red cloth, a danger warning. The fresh grave wasn't there when the family led by the Christian elders buried Cholooka. There being no other death or burial in the village in the last few days, apparently the cult reburied him without a coffin in the new grave. The red cloth tied was a clear instruction to ordinary people to back-off.

The party returned to the homestead. The next day, all the relatives except Auntie Chaiwe left for their homes in remote villages, Pazomba returning to Dowa.

Chapter 11

By 2 pm of December 9, Matipa was sitting before Det. Sgt Ronny Tizora and three of his men in an office at Kadoma Central Police Station. The furniture was old and plain. A telephone handset stood on a solitary desk around which the five of them sat, though the plainclothes were a detached segment on one side. Peza's four photographs, which she removed from the family's picture frame, were beside the handset. The sergeant was asking the questions, a tape recorder running. All the detectives were taking notes.

"Kindly state your name and address."

"My name is Matipa Muja. I live at Sakis Mine."

"Yesterday you told us your husband's name. Could you repeat it, please?"

"Akar. Akar Muja."

"How old is your husband?"

"Thirty-three years old."

"In what capacity is he employed at the mine?"

"He's a mill feeder."

"Can you give us his ID or passport number?"

"I don't know his ID number. He's no passport."

"The name Binga... was it your first time to hear it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can this name by any chance be your husband's other name?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Could it be your husband's nickname or something?"

She couldn't disclose that the Sakis-Venice Mine community called him terrier; he was quiet, dangerous and attacked without warning. "To my knowledge, he's no nickname. He's quiet and minds his own business."

The detectives exchanged glances.

The questions kept her on the edge of the chair. Inasmuch as she was obliged to protect her husband, she also had to guard against attracting a charge for deliberately lying to the police or harbouring a criminal.

“There’s something very interesting we discovered, Mrs Muja. It’s either there’s something wrong with national record keeping in this country or you’ve taken it upon yourself to lie to us.”

She sat up. Sweat beads stood on her forehead. “I’ve no reason to lie. At any rate, I want you to find Peza dead or alive. May I know what you discovered, sir?”

“Before I tell you about the discovery, I want you to know that lying to the police is a prosecutable offence. We can charge you with perjury. You’ll forgive me, Mrs Muja, if I sound threatening.”

Fear rose in her. She saw herself behind bars.

“The name Akar Muja isn’t in any government records. The office of the Registrar General doesn’t have that name. In other words, the name isn’t on the list of the living, foreign or native. It isn’t on the list of deceased persons either. He’s no birth record. He’s no entry record into the country across any one of our borders.”

She shook her head, frowning. “If he’s no record, what’s that to do with me? I’m not responsible for national records. I’m a simple person from Mungorwenyi Village in Nyanga.” She sighed in exaggerated exasperation. “I thought you called me so that I could give you information that could lead to finding Peza and his captors.”

“Take it easy, Mrs Muja. We must clear some grey areas first. We need to know what we’ve on our hands.” He paused. “Our HQ ran the name Binga through its computers, so did the National Social Security Authority.” He grinned. “NSSA has an employment history of everyone who ever worked and contributed tax in this country. The authority and our HQ made an interesting discovery. Of course, there’s a score or so of other Bingas in the country, but the system managed to eliminate them based on age and nationality...all except for one Binga Jochoma. Records show this Binga Jochoma is thirty-

three years old. He's on the Military Police's *wanted* list for deserting the Commando Regiment."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Very well, madam. The name Nomathemba, does it mean anything to you?"

Her heart missed a beat. She recalled the two names Jatropha scribbled in the earthen bowls. "No, sir. What about it?"

"Are you sure you haven't heard the name Nomathemba before?"

"No, sir."

"For the third time, are you sure you haven't heard the name Nomathemba before?"

"No, sir."

"Records with the Registrar of Marriages show he's legally married to one Nomathemba. She's a schoolteacher. Birth records show they bore two daughters, Nyanyadzi and Rusitu. Both daughters passed away in their infancy and were deregistered. What do you say?"

She wiped sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, and shook her head. "Akar was never a soldier." She forced a laugh and shrugged. "My husband isn't a polygamist. He's no other children besides our son, at least to my knowledge."

"Your husband is thirty thirty-three years old. He comes from Chikukwa Village in Chimanimani."

She hazarded and thought the best defence was to be on the offensive. "Sgt Tizora, I don't think whoever is thirty-three years old is Binga Jochoma. Thousands of men in Zimbabwe are that age."

"Mr Gilchrist Keneas told us you've lived at the mine for three years, which translates to your husband being employed by Mr Korykos for the same number of years you were resident at the premises. Can you tell us where you and your husband were before coming to the mine?"

“He was a freelance merchant or entrepreneur. I worked at Rosebud in Chegutu. Prior to that, I didn’t know him.”

“We’ve gathered that your husband has a history of violence. The man who came looking for him is a violent murderer... what could be the correlation and why?” The telephone on the desk rang. The sergeant switched off the recorder and picked the receiver. “Det. Sgt R. Tizora speaking,” he said into the mouthpiece and listened for a long time, taking notes and occasionally asking the speaker on the other end to go on. After a long while, he cradled the receiver and announced, “All the people killed at Sakis Mine will be given a state-sponsored funeral tomorrow. Journalists have already descended on the mine. The provincial Governor will attend.” He switched on the recorder. The interview continued. “Mrs Muja, can you tell us what happened on the day Peza was kidnapped and Remegio was set on fire?”

Matipa was relieved. More than willing to tell them everything she knew and had witnessed, she narrated everything from the apparently realistic, the surreal, the mysterious and the macabre. When she told them Bomani had somehow maintained his presence at the mine despite his physical absence, the detectives stopped taking notes and listened in disbelief. She talked about Emedhi, his returning from the hospital in stripped garbs and then the killings. She guessed they thought she was sliding towards insanity when she mentioned that the dead orderly returned as a tool in Bomani’s hands. Emedhi’s account was of no significance to them. They asked her questions that took her back to 29 November, subtly making her narrate again the events of that day. She did, all the while bemoaning their deviation by negating to pursue the Emedhi factor. It was monotonous.

“Thank you for coming, Mrs Muja,” Det. Sgt Tizora said, ending the interview at about 5:30 pm. “But I must underline our wish to interview your husband as soon as he returns. Something isn’t adding

up. Once again, thank you for coming. I must assure you we've started looking for Peza to the best of our ability."

"Thank you, sir."

"A police car can take you to Sakis Mine if you so wish."

"You're very kind, but no thank you." This evening she was going to meet Pastor Oje Ojele, the Man of God Ivy highly talked about the day before.

Matipa thanked the detectives again and left without Peza's photographs.

Chapter 12

Sitting on the tombstone, Bomani Kumanda continued to relive his tragic past.

A week after the discovery of the desecrated grave, Bomani received eight hundred euro from Benita through a bureau de change in Lilongwe. He took his mother to a government hospital in Salima. A doctor diagnosed her as suffering from acute fatigue and dehydration, and gave her a blood transfusion, vitamin and iron tablets, detaining her at the hospital for two days. Back in the village, she continued taking her prescribed tablets, her late husband's sister nursing her. She gained appetite and weight. The hue of death left her skin, which had progressively attained a disquieting pale. Cheruna's recovery was miraculous.

Bomani had no reason to fear she would die. As he marvelled at her noticeable recovery every day, at the back of his mind he obsessively puzzled over his father's death. The fire didn't kill him, but evil had flourished over his father and killed him. *Gule Wamkulu* was the cause of death. What boggled him was the ability of witchcraft to reach and destroy a convert.

The family needed protection. Who knew what rituals the cult performed at his father's grave when they were exhuming and reburying him? He feared evil would inundate and complicate their lives. The family needed a shield around itself.

It was indisputable there was something as wrong with the Watchtower denomination as there was with the protestant church he had joined in Kasungu. The denominations were spiritually void of power, which was the reason pennilessness had dogged him during his two-and-a-half -month stint as a temporal schoolteacher. He supposed he figured the reason: the Baptists, the Lutherans, the Methodists, the whole lot of them, seldom took communion, their error and the stem of their weakness.

A fortnight after the burial of his father, Auntie Chaiwe left for Chipoka where she lived with her family and husband. That afternoon, Bomani spoke to his mother as they lunched on pounded cassava and beef stew. “We need protection, Mother, or we’ll be killed. I’ve never trusted Chin’onon’ono and Chimsima. They weren’t pleased with the presence of the Witnesses here. All their actions weren’t in good faith.”

“I’m glad you’ve raised the topic,” she said. “I expected you to since you’re coming of age. Your father is dead. *Nyan* killed him. You must stand in his shoes. This homestead needs a father figure.” She halted and pondered. “What were you suggesting?”

“We must become Roman Catholics. That’s the true Church recognised in Heaven.”

She laughed coldly. “When *Gule Wamkulu* was killing me, where was Catholicism?”

She was angry as if she blamed her misfortune on him.

“Had we been Catholic then, attending Mass and partaking of its main attraction, the Eucharist, *Gule Wamkulu* wouldn’t have messed with us.”

“You’re too young to understand spiritual matters.” She shook her head. “My ancestors saved me from your father and his evil spells. I owe my life to them. If I lost my head and wore a rosary, I’d anger my forebears. If you want to be a Catholic, I’ve no qualms about it. Just don’t hoodwink us all into it.”

“Many African Catholics worship God and the ancestors at the same time.”

“Only hypocrites give themselves that liberty. This subject is closed.” She sighed in anger. “Won’t you ask me how your father became *gule*?”

“I was going to, Mother. The subject is somewhat taboo.” He looked away. “I was shocked to learn he was doing despicable things.”

“He was a member of *nyau* for about five years until the time of his death. He made me stand naked on an anthill by the shore of the lake. Under a full moon, he swore me to secrecy. As I made the oath, he slaughtered a cock and sprinkled me with its blood. I couldn’t say a word about it.”

“What was the cock for?”

“He said should I reveal his membership to the secret society I should suffer the same fate, or drown, he said, casting the carcass into Lake Malawi.”

“But how did he join *nyau*? Was he abducted?”

“It’s a long story. Five years ago, he went to Dowa and lived with Uncle Pazomba. Your father was a loafer then. Town life and loafing are always at loggerheads. He wanted to raise money for factory-treated cassava and maize seeds and a few bags of fertilizer for the next planting season.”

“Dowa is a small place. Jobs are hard to come by in Dowa.”

“Your father ended up a general hand at a road construction site. A big company was re-surfacing the Dowa-Ntchisi main road. They made a detour.” She made a face and shrugged. “I think I’m to blame.”

“Blame for what, Mother?”

“My illness and his death. I told your father not to return to this village empty-handed or I’d pack my belongings and return to my people in Karonga. I told him my parents were alive and I didn’t burn their homestead when he married me.”

“What made you say those awful words?”

“Poverty, Bomani. I was tired of poverty. When I thought of the bumper harvests my people in Karonga had year after year, I felt like a prodigal daughter wallowing in poverty far from home. That’s what made me say those words.”

“Did you mean it?”

“I half meant it. Your father took me seriously and pushed himself to the limit.”

“Tell me the whole story, Mother,” he said anxiously.

“Like I said, your father was a general hand. While they were constructing the detour off the Dowa-Ntchisi main road, he worked alongside a caterpillar, which unearthed a human skeleton in an ancestral grave. Work came to a halt because all the workers were African and afraid of the remains. The feeling was that they had disturbed someone’s final resting place. The project manager, an Australian, wasn’t pleased with the stoppage. He was worried about completing the project on schedule. The workers idled for hours. After failing to convince his workforce to return to work, the project manager offered two hundred American dollars to anyone or a group of people who would pick the bones and rebury them away from the detour. Your father was the only one who took the offer.” She fell silent and munched the cassava.

“He shouldn’t have done it for money. Reburying the remains was simply noble and decent.”

“He did it for money because he was desperate. Nobility is good, but it isn’t edible.”

“So what went wrong, Mother? How did it influence him to join *Gule Wamkulu*?”

“For a while nothing happened. At the end of the month, his contract ended. He brought home the seeds and the fertilizer I wanted, groceries and new clothes for all of us. He excelled my demands because of the two hundred dollars he added to his wages. Though I was happy, I disapproved of his reburying the remains. I thought he should’ve kept his distance from them like the rest of the workers.”

“What went wrong? You aren’t getting to the point.”

“He didn’t pick the bones and give them a pauper’s burial as in digging a grave and casting the bones unceremoniously, swearing at their unknown spirit not to bother him since he didn’t kill the person or know him for that matter. No, he didn’t do that. He went down on his knees, clapped his hands in supplication and addressed the

bones. He informed them he would rebury them under a birch tree nearby where they'd repose without disturbances or exposure."

Bomani stared at his mother impatiently.

"This is what went wrong, my son. Thirteen weeks from the day of the reburial, your father had a dream of an ancestral man in hides, feathers and a mask. The man thanked him for reburying him single-handedly and as decently as the situation allowed. The ancestral man said he would reward your father and shook his hand in the dream, whereupon *gule* drumbeat and singing erupted. The masked man began to dance *gule*-style, kicking dust and gyrating. He wasn't an ordinary dancer. In the middle of routines, he picked cumbersome rock boulders and placed them on his shoulders before he resumed dancing. He picked things a dozen men would strain to lift. While at it, and with your father gaping in astonishment, he edged to him and spat spittle into your father's open mouth."

"This was in a dream, Mother," Bomani said dismissively. "You explain it as if it happened in real life."

"One's life influences their dreams, and dreams mirror the future. There's no real distinction between dreams and life."

"What then happened?"

"In the morning, your father explained the dream to me. Within the week, your father went berserk. He took an axe and slaughtered all our cattle and goats. At night, he went to the graveyard and exhumed many skeletons, which he brought to the village and threw in people's homesteads. No one but me knew he was the one who had done it. It was scary. Some people remained indoors for many days." She shook her head and resumed eating.

"You leave me hanging. How did it end?"

"Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima came and took him away in the middle of the night. Half a dozen masked *Gule Wamkulu* dancers accompanied them. No one uttered a word. That's how your father became *gule*."

The story had frightened Bomani further and fanned his need for supernatural protection. Yet he couldn't convince his mother to believe in God, whom she referred to as a biased and segregating god for white people.

Exactly thirteen weeks after she told him the story, when she was bustling with health and neighbours were congratulating her for missing death by a whisker, she walked to the shores of Lake Malawi at daybreak, when the tropical sun's rays were lacquering the surface of the lake. Bomani was still in bed then. Some local anglers in dugout canoes saw and recognised her, and feared for her because she headed to a small stretch of the shore infested with crocodiles, and waded into the water until she was knee deep.

Cheruna walked deeper into the lake. The water became waist-high, and finally her torso submerged, according to the accounts of a handful of anglers who saw her at a distance and guessed they could be witnessing a suicide. While some appealed to her to return to the shore, some freed their canoes and oared rapidly to rescue her. Cheruna's head, now more of a forlorn melon on the lacquered surface than anything else, suddenly vanished underwater as if something dragged her down. No one saw her alive again. Bomani reported Cheruna missing.

A couple of weeks later, a fishing tug caught her body in its net when it was trawling between Monkey Bay and Chipoka, and brought the body to the shore for surrender to the police. That same day, a police van with two uniformed officers wearing surgical masks and latex gloves brought her corpse to Chapola Village in a battered stainless steel coffin. The eyes, ears and nose were missing, purportedly devoured by marine life. Chunks of flesh fell off the body, which gave a fetid and unbearable odour.

Wishing the police had cremated her remains wherever they found them, Bomani helped the officers carry the coffin into the cooking hut. Too shocked to wail, he sobbed as though his eyes had become springs. From the day anglers feared her drowned, he

accepted she was dead because Lake Malawi was a demonic devourer. Yearly it killed many locals and tourists. From the day of her disappearance and sighting tottering towards the depths of the lake, he had mourned his mother's death.

Villagers watched the culmination from a distance. For a long time, no one came to pass condolences. Bomani understood the people's feelings and fear. They perceived his family as having courted death, mingling with such could've dire consequences. The officers expressed their condolences and said they'd return after some days to pick their coffin, and left.

Despite sending word to his mother's relatives in Karonga District near the northern tip of the country, none of her relatives came. They accused Bomani and his late father of delving in witchcraft, and suggested he could eat Cheruna's remains if he wanted.

When maggots threatened to devour the entire corpse and some neighbours had temporarily moved into homesteads a little further from the beleaguered one, Bomani, accompanied by Pazomba and Chaiwe, approached Chief Chapola for advice and assistance. The chief ruled the three couldn't bury the body of a non-relative, and instituted a pauper's burial at village level. Women past mendicancy weaved a pouch of sisal into which they stuffed Cheruna's body and went on to bury it in the local graveyard half a pace from Cholooka's grave.

His mother's death was the last straw. Two days after her burial, Bomani walked to the next village, about ten kilometres away, one of many on a large expanse of land all under Chief Chapola. The chapel that served Chapola Village was in this village. He would convert to Catholicism and become a full-fledged Catholic. A church founded and rightly built on top of the remains of St Peter would protect him from *Gule Wamkulu* evil.

The chapel was stony and imposing among pole and clay homesteads. The building was a cross between an octagon and an

oblong. Gigantic columns rigging a high roof suggested a Corinthian architecture. His estimate was that a congregation of two hundred people could sit comfortably in the building. The church's flower gardens were trampled and desolate. Surrounding the premises was a worn-out security fence, which served no purpose except marking the boundary of the property. Goats and sheep willy-nilly crossed in and out of the premises.

Except for the goats and the sheep straying through numerous holes in the fence, no one was about the stone building. Bomani walked through a gap left by a wrought iron gate lying on its side. As he walked down a stone-cobbled path flanked by broken statues, his resolution to be Catholic grew. He would be happy if the priest would rechristen him David, Joshua or Abed-nego. The name Bomani was tribal and pagan, a possibly magnet of ill fortune.

He ascended three steps that took him to the threshold and an open atrium whose main feature was a waist-high, water-filled font. After knocking in vain on the main double doors, a grandiose wooden portal with intricate engravings of heavenly beings and Mary cradling baby Jesus, he tried to turn their knobs. The doors wouldn't open, but nothing would deter him. He went round the building, goats and sheep scuttling from him, and met the priest, Fr Pengani Phiri, as the man of the cloth exited from the vestry. The community knew the priest for his kindness and piety.

Bomani fell on his knees in the dirt. The priest stopped in mid-stride, astonished.

"Father Pengani Phiri, I've come to give my life to God," he said. "Evil dogs me and our family. What would it take for me to become a confirmed and baptised Catholic?"

The priest smiled and crossed to him, his arms outstretched. "Welcome home, my child."

Chapter 13

The pied crows perched in the trees shrieked, jerking Bomani from his recollections. The birds stared at him, probably fascinated by his nudity, he thought.

A crow was supposed to fall and die before him, confirmation of the success of the ritual he had performed since last night. He needed a sign. He thought of Jesus of Nazareth. When the worried disciples pressed Him for a sign He would rise from His death, He gave them the sign of Jonah.

Why was a crow not falling to its death? He looked at how he had purified himself and performed the ritual. He had been scrupulous, and had done it the way Mr Umi Chin'onon'ono and Joseph Chimsima had prescribed it to him in a graveyard in Salima, Malawi. When he went through the concoctions and a mental inventory of the ingredients in the smouldering bowl before him, it struck him that something of paramount importance was missing—menstrual blood that would've given life to the juju matrix.

His Catholic indoctrination and biblical tutorials rose to the occasion, God gave man dominion over all things, living or dead, organic or inorganic. Man was an earthly master as a priest was a representative of God in a given locality on earth. He thought of his days as a priest in the making and his tour of the Vatican, how he had envisaged himself becoming the first black occupant of Castel Gondolfo.

Watching the birds, Bomani reflected on the new pope. Unlike his predecessor, John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI lacked charisma and strong vocal cords; many critics within and without the Catholic Establishment seemed to point at the deficiencies as two of his weaknesses, but everyone was agreed God compensated for the deficiencies by endowing him with a tremendous intellect. At the University of Regensburg in Bavaria, he quoted the 14th-century

Catholic emperor of Byzantium, Emperor Manuel II Paleologus: *not to act reasonably is contrary to the nature of God*. Juju marinated reason and Bomani's entire life. He ate, talked, dreamt and thought juju. Not to trust in juju would be unreasonable of him. Recalling this quotation in conjunction with a verse in the Book of Mark, *be not afraid, only believe*, he was adamant everything was working for his good and to his advantage. Indeed knowledge was power. He held fast to his beliefs.

He knew there was power in whatever anyone believed. Though menses, an essential ingredient, was missing, Bomani would use his knowledge and staunch beliefs to compound the juju. Believing there was chaos and terror at Sakis Mine due to his spells; he rose from the rock, bent over and shoved the small finger of his left hand into his anus. The penetration was a little painful, but his facial expression remained bland. Ritual and sacrifice were synonymous. He pulled out the finger and inspected it closely, briefly. Pungent faeces soiled it. With the finger, he pointed at a crow perched on a tree nearest to him. Nothing happened. The crows continued to look down at him.

Knowing there was reward in perseverance, he continued to point at the bird until it flapped its wings and crowed briefly. Holding his breath, he kept pointing at it, squinting, his brow furrowing, wishing the bird dead. A minute passed. His eyes were watering from prolonged lack of air and his chest was beginning to hurt when the crow flapped its wings and tumbled to its death. A mordant smile crossed his lips. He licked the finger. *Binga'll come to me*, he thought. *The bird has confirmed it*.

A panicky cry behind him startled the birds into fleeing away. He swung around, straightening in time to see four of his men chasing Peza. The boy was running towards the headgear of Pioneer Shaft. The men ran in a wide arch, blocking the boy's way to the mine and forcing him to take the direction of the forest. Bomani noticed they were catching up with the boy. He would give him a thorough beating and make sure he curbed his leopard agility. If need be, he

would amputate the rascal's legs. Legless, if he tried to crawl away, Bomani would cut off the boy's arms. If the boy weren't careful, Binga would find his son reduced to a head on a limbless torso.

The leading man was an arm's reach behind the boy when their quarry turned abruptly, feigned running into his enemy, and, dodging like a hare, ran back through gaps between them, the men missing him by inches. When the men turned to continue with the chase, the distance between them and the boy was considerable and widening. Bomani saw that while Peza vaulted over bushes, his men went round them. The boy ran swiftly but with ease, like a professional runner tackling a marathon.

"Catch the boy or you're dead!" Bomani shouted. From the corner of his right eye, he saw the fifth man, the gunner. He was crouching and taking aim with the AK 47 rifle, cocking it as he did so. "Don't shoot!" he screeched. "We need the brat alive!"

The man lowered the rifle and stood erect to watch the chase. Peza fell; the terrain was too uneven for an athletic sprint. For some seconds he lay still, partially concealed by the underbrush and tree trunks. From the manner he fell, Bomani knew the boy was injured. The men closed around him, moving quickly to catch him, but the boy turned over, sat up and squatted on one knee like an athlete about to take off. Bomani saw blood spurting from Peza's nostrils. He was glad the boy was hurt, which would slow him down.

As his men were about to grab him, Peza crouched between the legs of one, tripping him. He feigned running into the other and sprang away. As the man tried to turn abruptly, he staggered and fell. Peza was dextrous. Bomani frowned as the boy resumed running steadily towards the mine, springing over bushes. Two of his men were down. The third ran into a thorny thicket and struggled to free himself, which left the little boy with one wobbling pursuer.

"Don't let the little bastard get away!" he shouted again. "Stone him!"

The rising men picked stones, but danced about with them, their armed hands outstretched, as the fourth man unwittingly shielded their target. If the boy reached Patchway Mine's perimeter fence, armed security guards would see him and come to his rescue. Bomani shoved the small finger up his anus again. With the finger, he quickly pointed at Peza, wishing him to tire and fall on his bleeding face. The boy kept running towards the mine, in no time he would be in the belt of trees planted around the mine before emerging into a wide clearance that served as a fireguard.

Bomani's brow folded. He kept pointing, holding back his breath. Peza was near the trees when he yelled, staggered and fell like dead matter. It seemed as if an invisible force hit the back of his head, buffeting him. Bomani smiled as his pursuer caught up with Peza. In a rage, he pulled the boy to his feet, smacked his face innumerable times and began dragging him to the cluster of trees near Bomani where their camp was. The boy was almost lifeless. The man threw the boy near an opening in the wall of the cage. Peza fell near a set of four *gule* drums, and sat up shivering, his arms covering his head. All the men except the gunner converged at the pen.

Licking the finger, Bomani crossed to the camp, his eyes on the boy. He towered menacingly over him, but Peza shied from his nudity. The boy was crying.

"Look at Bomani!" Bomani barked, "What do you see?" he stooped and held the boy's chin, forcing him to look up at him. "Do you see a pastor? Do you see a smiling Father Christmas?" He shook his head. "No. You see Bomani. You see a man who'll take your life should you misbehave again." He let go his chin and straightened.

"My father will beat you up," Peza said emotionally between sobs. "Everyone is afraid of him. He'll kill you."

Bomani laughed drily. "Only in movies are bad guys killed, little rascal. In real life, bad men kill saints. Bomani'll pulverise your father. You'll watch Bomani eat your father's heart and drink his blood." He turned to his men. "Keep him tied all the time."

Using a thin rope, the men tied Peza's hands and feet and passed a stick under his knees and over his elbows, rendering him immobile. They lifted him and literally began shoving him into the pen, a daunting task because the stick was about two metres long and caught the edges of the opening. The men put the boy down, undid a part of the wall and began placing him in the warren. For the boy to disentangle and extract himself from the mooring, he would either have to break the pole or an arm and a leg.

Bomani spoke with a dangerous calmness as the men worked. "You seek trouble, my boy. You'll get it in good measure. Seekers find. You can be deft, but Bomani is warning you, you cannot outrun a spirit. Your father knows better."

The men set about rebuilding the wall, securing the ends of the stick to it.

"Bomani can see the boy is crying. Children cry when they're in need of toys. Should he continue crying, find a black mamba or a Gabon viper and throw it in the pen." He turned and walked towards the smouldering bowl saying: "Bomani has rituals to perform. If he attempts to flee again, weary him with sodomy."

Chapter 14

How Binga Jochoma would recover part of his money was crystal-clear in his head. As the sun went down, he knew darkness would aid him. He needed it because what he intended to do was taboo and condemned by all tribes and peoples throughout the world.

Between now and the time it was dark enough, he would idle by driving through the streets of Greater Harare. Since it was rush hour, the speed was that of a snail. Cars moved bumper-to-bumper, irate drivers hooting and swearing at each other. Binga was at ease with himself and the traffic.

He took the opportunity to look at the human traffic going home in cars and on pavements. The pedestrians walked briskly. Twice, he saw pickpockets helping themselves to purses in unsuspecting women's handbags. Male motorists stared at girls in leggings and mini-skirts. City council police officers chased vegetable and airtime vendors from street corners. Girls in school uniform walked hand-in-hand with men. Rastafarians in colourful woollen hats and matching scarves sold ethnic Jamaican and African curios to motorists, and fled from the council officers.

Many expensive car models were on the roads, and in the hands of indigenous people. If only he could re-embark on the prowl, focused on the *Mona Lisa* through and through, he saw himself driving a Rolls Royce or a Bentley GT. Chasing after petite women achieved nothing. In the final analysis, it wasn't Gillian or her family who had failed him, but his folly for erotic pleasure. He had failed himself by mixing his priorities. Though the theft of the painting was now a bloated dream, it wasn't completely faded. Should he ever put his hands on a sizeable amount again, he would fly to France.

Whatever Mjomba, the Malawian diviner, vested in him on the night of 16 November would propel him into the world he desired.

He recalled the extraordinary nightmare he had when he passed out during consultation and dreamt of a thickset black bull attacking him. He couldn't easily forget the bull whose horns were like stabbing spears:

The beast was Zebu. It stood its ground in a small but high-walled wooden kraal. Mjomba stood behind the animal wielding a whip. Binga and the bull faced each other in the kraal, three paces between them. He was a matador in sleek elaborate bullfighting costumes; a flamboyant montero on his head with intricate embroidery, a white frilled high-collared dress shirt tucked into skin-tight black hose pants reaching slightly below his knees, both secured by a cincture-like yellow silk belt, a short golden tie, white knee-high socks, and skin-tight black hose pants. He was in the traje de luces, the revered bullfighting 'suit of lights', performing a series of formalised actions with a red cape in his left hand. Finally, he stopped and stood akimbo, to gain his breath and study the beast before him.

The bull's eyes were bloodshot and penetrating. It stood rooted, staring at him and digging the ground with its hind hooves. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. His right hand was empty. He should be holding the estoque, the short stabbing sword, in his right hand, with which he would dispatch the bull with a thrust between the shoulder blades. An ambivalent voice warned him matadors often perished in the arena.

At that point, the name Manolete, a bullfighter gored to death in the arena in 1947, crossed his mind. Binga looked around the kraal-cum-arena. Desolate graves in mute silence and shrouded in darkness stared back at him and the beast. Who was going to bail him?

The n'anga raised the whip and bit his lower lip. The Malawian lashed the bull once across its back with all his strength and climbed out of the kraal. The bull groaned, brought its horns down and dashed towards Binga. It overtook him as he turned to jump out of the way. Blood spurted from his left calf; the tip of one of its horns had cut him in the leg. He fell, but the bull stopped and turned. He had to rise quickly or the animal would trample and gore. He was barely on his feet when the animal lowered its horns and charged again at him, and he made the same mistake. The bull overtook him as he fell, blood spurting from his right calf.

He rose and wobbled backwards towards the wall of the kraal. It caught up with him before he could execute his defence. It turned, overtaking him sideward. As it passed him to whirl round, he looked down at his left thigh, which hurt badly. The bull had cut a gulf in the thigh, and had already turned and was charging again. His pants and socks were torn and bloody. In a similar fashion, it inflicted another wound in his right thigh, and, as before, rumbled past him like a compact avalanche.

Military knowledge told him the battle was asymmetrical; that the strength of the fighting parties was inversely unbalanced. No better situation called for retreat than this one. Graves were the spectators. He wasn't going to lose face.

Binga dived at the walls of the kraal in a bid to scurry to safety in the graveyard. The bull was swift. He was half-way up the high poles when the beast passed below him. He closed his eyes in agony as a horn cut his buttocks one after the other in quick succession. The impact hurled him back into the kraal. He fell badly, hitting the ground forehead first, which dazed him. Sand grains entered his eyes and stung them. He just had to rise to prevent the worst happening to him. He staggered to his feet, his brain frantically processing a thousand things at once as he peered at the world through hurting eyes. The black bull stood before him, its nostrils flaring in demented distress. Using its hind hooves, it scooped cupfuls of earth. His fundament hurt and he tried to nurse it with his hand. His legs were drenched in his blood.

The bull charged at him and turned, striking his sternum with the tip of its horn, and piercing it. The impact tossed him. He somersaulted several times in mid-air before hitting against the poles and slumping to the ground, head first. Instinct hinted him to rise. He did, laboriously, as the animal positioned itself for another attack. Because he felt he was too wounded and weak and had lost too much blood to climb the wall of the kraal, he turned and crouched in a vain attempt to get out through a gap in the fence. The beast's hooves clangoured. It ran past him, having cut his shoulder blade. He was determined to escape and continued unbindered in his attempt. The bull passed him again, ripping his other shoulder blade.

Mjomba appeared before him with the whip, and ruthlessly lashed his head and shoulders, drawing blood, until he fell back into the pen on his belly. The bull

sniffed him in the face as he lay motionless, resigned to whatever killing method at the disposal of the animal. It continued to sniff his face and he raised his head inquisitively. The bull walked away for momentum. This was it, he thought, there was nowhere to run. If he had to die, he preferred to die that instant without prolonging his death. Binga knelt and lowered his head down to align his forehead with the bull's horns. If it could gore him in the forehead, he would die in seconds.

The beast flared its nostrils. He closed his eyes as it came for him, the noise of a thousand clattering hooves accompanying it. He felt the impact in the centre of his forehead, right where he had intended it to gore him. Apart from that, he felt nothing, which induced him to open his eyes. When he did, he realised the bull had assumed a black mercurial form and was pouring itself into him through the forehead. Binga passed out in the dream.

Jatrophah and his alleged prophecy crossed his mind. Matipa had told him the prophet's words verbatim: "Madzimai, tell your husband at God's appointed time he'll pick digging tools and embark on digging. Go and say to his face, 'The prophet says when you dig, dig, dig, and dig!' Madzimai, wealth awaits you and your husband underground! If you can turn him from his wickedness, he'll find the wealth sooner than later! Make God's bosom your habitation."

What had the so-called Man of God meant? Was Binga erroneously planning a heist in Europe thousands of kilometres away when he should be gathering digging tools? Where would he dig? He couldn't just dig anywhere and expect to find wealth. The prophecy didn't make sense to him.

Ironically, he now had two second-hand picks and two shovels he bought cheaply from an open-air hardware at Siyaso in Mbare high-density suburb. The tools were in the car. The prophecy said he himself had to dig, which was beneath him. Tonight there would be digging somewhere, but not pursuant to Jatrophah's prediction. Unfortunate people would dig for him. In a few hours, he would recover part of his money and return to Sakis Mine. Matipa and Peza were going to be pleased with him. Tomorrow, 11 December, the

compound dwellers were going to look at him in awe and envy when he brought his family groceries.

Chapter 15

Kadoma Central Police Station was at the only robot-controlled intersection in the small city. Matipa left the police premises at sundown and walked westwards away from the city's dysfunctional robots. West was the General Hospital and Jameson High School. Ivy told her Joppa International Ministries was between the hospital and the elite school.

As she walked, she reflected on what she learnt from the CID. The interview, especially the name *Nomathemba* haunted her senseless. She ambled like a sleepwalker. There were strong chances this Nomathemba whom the prophet picked and national records paired with Binga Jochoma was in Akar Muja's life. A shorter version of the name was Norma, the name her husband often pronounced on the marriage bed. He had tried to console her lamely by saying Norma was a Hollywood star he noticed in a movie and had fallen in love with the sexuality of the character, not the person. In justifying the despicable blunder, he had stuttered. Cunningly, he had curbed a repetition of the fiasco by calling her empty words: sweetie, honey, chocolate and darling.

Despite her distaste of the apostolic faith and its leader, there just had to be some correlation between the prophecy and the investigative deductions. Either Nomathemba was married to her husband or he cohabited with her when he wasn't at the mine. The same applied to Gillian. The prophet ordered her to destroy the bowls if she wished her husband to return. Nomathemba's bowl was broken and history. On getting home, she would take Gillian's from the wardrobe, the stubborn one that bounced, and break it. Though it now soured her sensibilities Jatropa was pagan, she hoped his spells had worked on Nomathemba. In the back of her mind, she feared she was delving into witchcraft.

The unknown women were one bother, but now she was almost convinced her husband was Binga Jochoma. It was foolish on her part to suppose Bomani and the government authorities were both wrong. For seven years, she had lived as a wife to a man whose identity she couldn't vouch for. Many questions plagued her. What if Akar was more brutal than Bomani and turned against her for losing the child to the monster? There were chances he would never return. Would he have the courage to go for Bomani if he knew where to find him? If he had no idea of where to find the kidnapper and his gang, how would he track them?

She ambled towards the hospital. When it came into view, she switched her mind to Remegio. The teenager's corpse lay desolate in the mortuary. If no one failed to coax his father and stepmother, the body would receive a pauper's burial. At the entrance of the hospital, she turned left into Mashonganyika Avenue. As directed by Ivy, Matipa found Joppa International Ministries along the avenue in Masters Suburb, a middle-income neighbourhood. The church was between Jameson High School and the hospital.

A large signboard stood conspicuously near the entrance:

THE TABERNACLE
Joppa International Ministries
Jonah 2 vs. 8

The letters were in red. A service timetable in black and smaller fonts was below the denominational name. Pausing to read the information on the board, she noticed there wouldn't be any service on the day, which meant the Man of God was free to meet and pray for her, if he was available. A high brick wall of intrinsic designs surrounded the House of God.

The hour was 6 pm, but it was already dark and darkening further. Mashonganyika Ave, a north-to-south tarred road flanked with gay Jacaranda trees and garden bungalows, stretched deserted

except for a few members of the Johannes Masowe apostolic sect walking from the southern end where there were many hills with various shrines on it, remnants of congregations footing home after daily prayers. She pitied these modern Pharisees and Sadducees; in white apparels, they looked angelic yet lived in manifold darkness. For believing prophets could harness God's power in earthen bowls, she thought they were verifiable idiots. She had no kind words for them in her reflections.

As she started towards the church gate, she trusted Ivy's word the pastor would be available to entertain church members, especially couples in need of marital counselling. Matipa marvelled at the power and ingenuity of the Word of God. This pastor, a bachelor, counselled married people. Ivy told her the man who stood in the desert in which the Israelites sojourned for four decades, among other places of reverence in the Holy Land, hardly left the church premises.

By the church gate, a two-winged wrought-iron portal ornamental with latticework, sat a blind beggar. He was a giant of a man, dark and obese, his belly hung out of his golf T-shirt. His sandals were an improvisation from worn out lorry tyres. The man, reacting to her footsteps, began to sing in a discordant soprano as she approached. He sang about the giving of alms to beggars and the heavenly rewards awaiting the kind-hearted in the hereafter.

Her heart told her she had to be kind to others, especially now, for God to be kind to her in turn. Bending to drop a fifty-cent coin in the man's bowl, she smelled alcohol from the breath of the beggar, which prompted her to scrutinise his eyes. They were bloodshot. The pupils were clouded and darting. However, she was convinced he was blind. Why did he drink? Perhaps he was a Catholic beggar at the gate of a protestant church. She shook her head mildly. It wasn't her business to know why purported Christians sinned. However, this reminded her that most Christians were hypocrites.

“God bless you a hundredfold,” the man said, groping for the money and pocketing it. “If you intend to see Pastor O, he’s been turning people away who came to see him around this hour.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Yes, madam, try tomorrow, I suppose. Come earlier than this. Four o’clock, if I may suggest.”

“I must try my luck now.”

“Madam, people have been flocking here since morning for prayers and counselling. Though he’s a gifted Man of God, he’s human and can do with some rest.”

“I live out of town and can’t just make a U-turn here. I insist on trying my luck.”

“Good luck,” he intoned. “I hope the pastor will be pleased to see you.”

“He’s a Man of God. He’ll be happy to see me, definitely.” She said cutely and resumed walking.

“There’s a bench near the entrance, madam,” the beggar shouted. “Kindly sit on it and wait for the pastor. He’ll come for you.” The beggar didn’t resume singing.

She knew he was waiting for the footsteps of another pedestrian.

A towering concrete arch joined the gate’s concrete posts and held a giant crucifix at its summit. The sculpture of a tormented Christ on it, His side wounded, looked down at her, the head in a crown of thorns. It gave her assurance she had reached a revered place of God, and she would be unburdened of all her woes.

Between the posts, she paused. The small church and its pristine flower gardens dominated by evergreens astounded her. In most of them, she spotted marigolds, lilies and floribundas, which reminded her of the manicured lawns and flowerbeds at the Sakis offices. At once, she recalled the dream, of Akar Muja with thirteen scarlet roses on his head and a matching bandana around his neck.

She savoured the place. The venue was a perfect place for a humble wedding, she reflected, wishing she had wed her husband in

the church and had their photographs taken in the immaculate gardens. It wasn't all lost, she grasped; the God she bowed to was a God of restoration. On these premises, she would wed Akar if God willed it...if only Akar could convert. Such a marriage would open the floodgates of blessings in her life and pave way for the materialisation of Jatropha's prophesy. Then they'd be rich beyond anyone's wildest imagination. She discovered there were times when she conveniently chose to believe the pagan prophet; and times when she condemned him utterly.

The church building stood like an asphalt jewel on two medium-size stands. Magnificently lit with bulbs concealed in lantern-like frosted glass lamp-holders, with shades of different colours emanating from its yellow and emerald-tinted windowpanes, she found the church a delightful piece of architecture as she walked through its open wrought-iron gates onto a brick-cobbled driveway leading to the building's entrance. The façade was white. A vivid gradation of multi-coloured light from the church's arched windows gave an iridescent hue to the lawn and flowerbeds immediately around the building.

She walked with humility, repentant she had displeased God when she bowed to angels and sang songs in praise of Archangel Gabriel and Michael. It haunted her she had irrationally believed in Baba Johannes, a mortal African who died in the early 70s. Thoughtlessly, she had clung to the bearded man's earthly doctrine of denigrating the Holy Bible, shunning employment deeming it a generic form of Egyptian bondage. The founder despised whites and all things European. She understood that if it were the days before Christ, she would've atoned for her sins in sackcloth and covered in ashes.

She thought Ivy had erred. The receptionist-cum-secretary should've told her of this church earlier. If Ivy had, she reasoned the preposterous disaster or at least much of it at Sakis Mine wouldn't have happened. The Spirit of God would've stopped Bomani from

kidnapping her son. Remegio would be alive, so would Gogo Belemina, *Madzibaba* Tinashe, six members of one family and Evans Emedhi. A body count by the police put the number of the dead at twelve with one seriously injured, the adolescent escapee from the neighbour's hut. The more she refrained from reliving the tragedy of yesterday, the more she recalled it, the recollection stirring shivers in her. Presently, as she walked to the entrance of the church building, she told herself she had to stop reliving the traumatic experience of 29 November and the recent killings.

Near the church entrance was a concrete bench on the edge of the driveway. The beggar had asked her to sit on it. She did. From that position, she could partially see the parsonage, a neat cottage behind a line of pine trees. Its lights were on. An all-terrain Prado parked in a shade near the house bore further confirmation the pastor was home. Ivy had told her the sleek vehicle was a tribute from a thankful English executive cured of prostate cancer and arthritis at the church.

As she sat on the bench, she recalled the slaughter at the mine. In a bid to invite pleasant thoughts and let them dominate her mind, she looked about at the flower gardens and a magnificent fountain in the churchyard. They were exquisite and stood as flowery islands in an oceanic greenery of a manicured lawn. Yet floribundas on a rockery reminded her of the flower gardens at the offices of Sakis Mine. Again, she recalled the mysterious dream she had on the night of 25 November; the night before Mr Gilchrist Keneas summoned her to the office. The nightmarish riddle triggered the elusive *déjà vu* four days before Peza's abduction.

The confounding dream came back to her: Her husband was returning home with Peza on his back, twelve floribundas planted in Akar's head like a scarlet halo. The thirteenth one was like a centrepiece on the crown of his head. A red bandanna was around his neck. The roses and the bandanna were scarlet. Akar staggered

from exhaustion. The expression on his face was both jubilant and lamenting.

She condemned herself for coming to a church and idling on a bench puzzling over a dream as if that was her objective of the day. *Cast all your worries upon Him* a biblical verse instructed. Rather than idle on a bench, it seemed sensible to enter the tabernacle and cast all her sorrows on God.

She could pray for many things as she waited for audience with the pastor, one of which was God's forgiveness for her deviation. Through prayer, she could poke Akar into returning. If God heard her plea, he could decree normalcy at the mine. The souls of the people killed in the compound and Remegio's needed salvation. She would start by praying for the souls of the innocent victims, hapless people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. If Peza was alive, he required her fervent prayers.

Above all, she wanted God to give her hope the kidnapping would end with her reuniting with her son and husband, though despite herself she was convinced there was no way it could end well when so many people were dead and she was facing eviction. Christmas was drawing closer by the day. The festive day would find her not only childless, but also homeless and widowed.

Glancing towards the gate and realising the blind man was still sitting on the ground, she rose and walked to the polished and imposing wooden double doors of the building. Archaic and grandiose, they were an ostentatious portal. On trying the handle, she was glad when it turned. Her skin tingled with expectation. Her image reflected in the polished floor caught her attention. She wasn't amused with herself; her canvas shoes were soiled, scruffy and in sharp contrast to the polished red floor.

According to Ivy, sacred souvenirs abound in the building. She reasoned it was proper for a sinner of her magnitude to remove her shoes in humility, which was far from a strange custom to her, the sect taught her to humble herself that way before she stepped on the

soil of any apostolic shrine, and every time she prayed. A person didn't have to wait for a bush to burn to retire oneself to profound humility before one's Maker. She bent and removed her shoes, and, using a cloth she drew from her handbag, quickly wiped her feet and sheens. She entered the church, the shoes in her left hand and her right hand humbly at her bosom.

As she walked into the building, she wondered if Pastor Ojele was a prophet or a Man of God gifted otherwise. Was he a *thus-saith-the-Lord* type of a saint who instantly delivered an afflicted person from a situation? Ivy hadn't said much. Once she stood before him, she would use the Nebuchadnezzar approach. *If you cannot tell what I dreamt, how then can I expect you to interpret it?*

She walked into a marble anteroom, past a knee-high angelic gargoyle gently spitting water onto its body, which cascaded to a font at its feet. The water cycled noiselessly. The font and the gargoyle were made of polished brass. Reconsidering, she was about to pass the font when she thought Pastor Ojele couldn't have put ordinary water in the font. The water ought to have splashes from the Dead Sea or River Jordan. Matipa dipped a hand in the water and wiped her face, sighing with exhilaration as she did so.

The interior of the church was Spartan, the feel antediluvian, further astounding her. Indiana tiles with a black basalt trim covered the floor. Her eyes roamed the length and breadth of the church. No one was inside; it appeared. An Ark-like altar complete with Cherubini was on the pulpit. On the arresting altar was a large leather-bound Bible on a linen mantle. A golden curtain cascading from the ceiling to the pulpit hid the back wall and section of the church.

Matipa guessed it was behind this curtain where the pastor kept the holy items, and the Man of God had communion with God. The other walls were oak-panelled. The pews were wooden and decorated with intricate engravings; of the Last Supper, of tablets bearing scribbling of the Ten Commandments, of Mary and the Holy Child,

of a shepherd with his folk... the images were numerous. She would pray near the altar.

As she walked quietly towards the pulpit she discerned faint whimsical sounds, and stopped a few metres down the aisle to listen. She stood still. The sound seemed to come from the altar. The empty church was producing an echo, such that the sounds seemed to come from every direction, before fading. Another sound reached her, like a brief mew or a sigh. The weak noise of splashing or gently flowing water followed, interrupted with a grunt and a sigh, reverberating to total silence. The mysterious noises erupted again, sounding like laboured breathing intermingled with the sound of gentle ripples hitting against a barrier.

What could make such indecipherable sounds in an empty church? What could explain them? Matipa looked about, fearful. Then an awakening rose within her, her heart leaping with joy. She had heard that ministering angels often announced their presence with hermetic sounds the human ear couldn't place.

Matipa was grateful Ivy hadn't lied to her. The sounds were an indisputable sign Pastor Ojo Ojele was a Man of God and the tabernacle was an abode bustling with angels, which were likely welcoming her in Aramaic, the language of the Saviour and the prophets. This pastor hadn't sojourned in vain to the motherland of Judaism and Christianity. On learning about the Nigerian pilgrim, her initial reaction was mistrust. Everything about Ivy's story, from the ordination of the pastor to the powers she purported he had, sounded fictitious. Now she had no idea what she would do if an angel materialised in the tabernacle.

One thing was certain; she wouldn't leave this place the same. Expectant of supernatural manifestations at any time, she made her way down the aisle. As she approached the pulpit, the sounds grew louder. On edging to the pulpit, she stopped to listen. The sounds weren't emanating from the altar, but from the left side of the curtained enclosure behind the altar. Her curiosity mounted with the

hermetic sounds. She stepped to the curtain, instinctively tiptoeing as if any noise on her part would disturb the celestial peace obtaining.

She saw herself as someone privileged to look into the Holy of Holies, someone about to cast his or her eyes on the Ark of God. Though she was beside herself with anxiety, she briefly reflected on her purity in the eyes of God. A self-audit found her righteousness questionable: in her heart were self-blame, anger and hatred. She resented Jatropha. She was contemptuous towards the Creator for allowing mayhem to reign in her life. God was the author of her woes. It was within His means to present her to a meek and God-fearing man; yet He had arrogantly placed her on a collision course with Akar seven years ago.

Priests who entered the Holy of Holies or bore the Ark sought God's forgiveness and purified themselves before the deed. Admitting she was a sinner, she murmured a short prayer for the absolution of all her sins and the blood of the Lamb to cover her. Then she was ready. She bent and gently lifted a section of the curtain. As the curtain rose, first she saw a tiled cream vinyl floor followed by rippling water, then an empty condom packet floating on the water. Was her sight deceiving her? *What's wrong with my eyes?*

On pulling up the curtain further, she learnt the water was a large, ornate baptismal pool. On the far wall was a painted mural of John the Baptist as he baptised Christ. However, in a far corner were two naked people facing the rear wall, a gyrating man and a purring slender woman. Was this baptism in progress? She blinked several times afraid the couple were an illusion. No, she wasn't hallucinating: a naked man and a woman were in the pool.

Only the woman's outstretched, tattooed arms and hands were visible to Matipa from her angle; the man obstructed her body. The tattoos were butterflies, serpents and scorpions stretching from her shoulders to her wrists. The man clung to her with his right hand, his mid-section gyrating. His left hand held her left leg above the water

at an obtuse angle. The woman's thigh muscles were twitching, her raised toes clenching and unclenching.

Matipa was both shocked and mesmerised. Accounts of the immorality of some pastors and Catholic priests had reached her, but she wasn't expecting such desecration. Inasmuch as she wanted to turn away or shut her eyes, she was enchanted. Desirous palpitations rose in her bosom. Despite her strongest condemnation of the confirmed act, Matipa felt a fire rising in her groin. As the copulation continued, this time a little hastened, Matipa studied the man. There were chances some miscreants had found the church doors open, as she had, and decided to be intimate in the pool. He was huge and black. His shoulders were broad and muscular. To her chagrin, he met the description of Ivy's Man of God, Pastor Ojo Ojele.

Suddenly the spectacle sickened her, more so as the realisation that some congregants would be baptised in the desecrated water. She wanted to turn back and run away, but a light knock came on a window to the enclosure, halting the fornicators.

"A woman wants to see you, Pastor O." It was the beggar's voice. "She's on the bench outside."

The pastor shook his head. "I'm not done yet. Keep her busy. I know you can. Thanks."

Matipa put down the hem of the curtain and walked towards the double doors, wishing she hadn't set foot in the church, wishing God would strike the two dead on the spot. This was anathema. Where was the God who struck dead Ananias?

The woman behind the curtain began to moan and urge the pastor. Her words soured Matipa. The sounds of splashing water rose in tempo and rapidity. This church was no house of God but an image thereof, an image unworthy of God's presence and grace. Matipa wished she could fly to the exit, but running could lead to her discovery and death; the pastor had a reputation to maintain, a job to keep and a congregation to shepherd.

If he had the temerity to defile baptismal water in his own church, he could kill her, dump her body in a disused mine shaft or throw it in a dam, and continue with his sermons every Sunday and sexual escapades between services. She suspected the miraculous healing and casting of demons Ivy talked about were stage-managed. People wanted to see miracles and brag about how anointed their pastors were; the Nigerian gave them the miracles.

Her conscience dictating she had to shun the company of sinners, she quickened her pace. On exiting, she saw the blind man groping his way across the lawn using a white stick. She hated the beggar, an accomplice in the pastor's transgressions. No, she wasn't going to stop at the bench and wear her shoes; the church and its yard were unworthy of her presence.

Restraining herself from breaking into a run, she walked to the gate and into Mashonganyika Ave. As she quickened her pace to board a commuter omnibus in the town centre for Sakis Mine, she ruminated on the fornication. Notwithstanding her repulsion for their despoliation of the baptismal pool, she envied the woman. Desire stirred in her, taking possession of her mind. Despite herself, she wished her husband would make love to her like the wayward pastor, slow, purposeful and enduring.

Regrettably, she saw that all these years she had been content with the tactless manner Akar smooched her. The reason of her error was inexperience. At the same time, he was the only man she had ever slept with. For the first time she reflected despairingly of her husband, the man she had adored for many years. For seven years, she was nothing but his child-minder and sex object. In actuality, she was his Laundromat, cook and an unpaid security guard for his property when he was away, which was quite often. Apart from that, she was of no consequence to him. Their intimacy was consensual rape. He was pathological. She deserved and longed for appreciation and sexual gratification, the kernels of a married woman's life. Was

there a school for romance, foreplay and lovemaking in which she could talk him into enrolling?

At a street corner, she stopped and put on her shoes, in the back of her mind trying to figure out why her husband was so impersonal with her. Again, the fact was undeniable; he didn't love her though he was amicable to her and Peza. No wonder he was discreet to her to the point of leaving home without telling her. Though he put food on the table, he was void of love. For thick porridge, basic relish and shelter, he sexually exploited her.

She walked into town her mind in turmoil, having slavishly loved a man she hardly knew for many years. The names *Nomathemba* and *Gillian* echoed in her head, compounding her turmoil. She didn't know what to think.

At the commuter omnibus rank, she joined a throng of people waiting for Empress and Venice-bound buses. As she stood among them, she tried to come to terms with her predicament. Though Emedhi was dead, the atmosphere at Sakis Mine remained dreadful. Bomani could still rouse someone with cataclysmic results. The two men she had envisaged as fiery unshakeable pillars in her life, Jatrophu and Akar, were suddenly an illusion. The apostolic faith had put blinkers on her to look within the religion for solace and protection to prosperity, conditioning her to look up to Baba Johannes for everything. For the first time in years, she thought outside the two.

Gradually it dawned on her she had an only brother two years her senior, Jasper Gumbo, a professional trophy hunter and game ranger. Jagadzamakarwe, 'Decapitator of crocodiles' was his earned nickname. Jasper was an ex-decathlete with a Herculean physique. The crocodile was his speciality. He was renowned for a ninety-eight percent success rate in single-handedly tracking dangerous Nile crocodiles in swampy areas, often in grottos, and killing them.

Her brother would find Bomani and prune the monster to size with a serrated hunting knife. If Peza were dead, at least her brother

would avenge him. However, there was a possible impediment: Jasper's live-in girlfriend, Senator Lisa Gororo, twice his age and more dangerous to him than the crocodiles he killed. She controlled him like a puppet. If he walked out on her, she could set political thugs to murder him.

Matipa and her people in Mungorwenyi Village were at loggerheads with the political figure. Ever since he moved in with the senior legislator two years ago, Matipa and her parents had severed ties with Jasper following his refusal to ditch the woman. At one point, their father threatened to storm Senator Lisa's sprawling manor, property she acquired at the height of the farm invasions in 2000. He cowered at the last moment; he could be shot or arrested for trespassing Van Praaah Farm in the outskirts of Kadoma, or she could trump criminal charges against him.

Jasper's number was on Matipa's fingertips. In the morning, she would go to the mine office and ask Ivy for her mobile phone. Paradoxically, though the sacrilegious intimacy in the baptismal pool had sickened her, it somehow led to her recollection of Jasper. Suddenly her confidence plummeted. How would Jasper track the demon? If at all he managed to trail the kidnapper, could a crocodile catcher-cum-killer subdue a murderer of Bomani Kumanda's calibre?

Chapter 16

By noon of the following day, 10 December, the Department of Social Welfare with the forced assistance of a dozen convicts was burying the twelve corpses. The bodies of *Madzibaba* Tinashe and Gogo Belemina were among the dead. The venue was the local graveyard on the western fringes of Sakis Mine near the obelisk. The atmosphere was sombre. Many friends, relatives and workmates of the dead mourned as if Evans Emedhi had just committed the murders, and the wailers' lives were intricately dependant on the killed persons.

For Matipa, the morning had been long and torturous. The mourning itself a heart tugging caricature of doleful drama. Genuine tears streamed from her eyes from the start of proceedings at about 8:30 am. Because of her husband, or because a prophesied demon thought he was Binga, twelve lives had been terminated and families had lost beloved ones.

As Akar's wife and natural representative in his absence, people looked at her with resentment. It piqued her that some of the workers had approached the mill manager with the intention of having her expelled from the compound. The thought that she was an object of ridicule and contempt tormented her conscience. Rumour already had it the strange veneer would kill more people, an invisible sword hung over Sakis Mine.

Because it was a state-sponsored funeral, many government vehicles and people in suits and decorated service uniforms attended. The stately figures lent the occasion some semblance of the funeral of a Provincial or Liberation War hero; a low-esteemed calibre of heroes buried with a token of state rites. The most respected person among the mourners was the Governor of Mashonaland West Province, the same man who presided at the erection of the obelisk over the eighteen illegal gold diggers entombed at the mine.

In the crowd of hundreds, which gathered for a church service in the crude football pitch, Matipa spotted Det, Sgt Tizora and the detectives who interviewed her the day before at Kadoma Central Police Station. Then there were the twelve cheerless convicts in stripped uniforms. The prisoners dug the graves and assisted with placing the bodies into cheap wooden coffins brought to Sakis Mine in an old, squeaky and jerky government lorry marked 'DDF' on the doors. DDF stood for District Development Fund, a government department responsible for communal development in the rural areas. Half a dozen stern-looking prison guards armed with pistols and AK 47 rifles watched the convicts.

The prisoners were sunburnt, malnourished and sad, sacrificial beings forced to bury strangers. On their arrival, the convicts moved from one house, hut or hovel to the other, road and footpaths. Everywhere, including Matipa's threshold, they picked human bones and reburied the remains in the open graves in the graveyard.

Among the mourners, Matipa saw five soldiers in red berets. The men were muscular and belligerent by appearance. The soldiers mingled with the people boastfully, many people cowering visibly on their approach and giving them way. Matipa looked at them warily, aware they were also looking at her the same. She knew the men in red berets were paramilitary police officers deployed to further investigate and possibly arrest her husband on the suspicion he was indeed Binga Jochoma.

As she grieved, she found it weird for anyone to suppose her husband was an ex-commando. There just had to be something wrong with the manner the Registrar of Births and Deaths kept records. Nevertheless, the fact that Bomani had inquired after the whereabouts of Binga whom he seemed sure was her husband sprang occasional pangs of fear in her. If by any chance Akar fell into the hands of these brutes whether he was or wasn't Binga, the beasts were likely to tear him apart. Nonetheless, inasmuch as she feared for

her husband, she knew Akar could break their bones if they failed to practice enough caution. Both parties were at risk of the other.

By 10 o'clock, all the dead were in the pitch and in their coffins, and a prison chaplain presided at the special church service for the dead, the subjects of the state-funded burial. The Governor was an aloof politician of a few words. Both his grief and humility were forced. He greeted the mourners and said, "Mashonaland West Province, the government and the nation at large grieves with the bereaved families for their untimely losses! I urged people to solve their differences amicably!" His speech was a clear sign he was misinformed. Before sitting down in one of the sofas availed by Mr Keneas for the VIPs, the Governor said, "It's a communal and societal duty for communities to arrest and present to the nearest police station or psychiatric unit of the closest hospital anyone deemed insane and a danger to the public. All of us must compliment the work of the police."

About three people clapped hands for him. Only one woman ululated, which was somehow befitting. Total silence would've embarrassed and offended the senior politician and guaranteed the community of political reprisals. In the country, people had to applaud any leader of his stature whether he spoke sense or bluffed. Insincere applause did wonders to politicians.

The chaplain stood up and read scriptures that reminded everyone that life was temporal, and that earthquakes, volcanoes, pestilences, strange occurrences and moral decadence would reign supreme in the last days.

"Satan walks up and down the earth," he preached. "He prowls for people to destroy!" He opened a page in the Bible and read. "*The horseman lifteth up both the bright sword and the glittering spear: and there's a multitude of slain, and a great number of carcasses; and there's no end of their corpses; they stumble upon their corpses.... Behold I'm against thee, saith the Lord of hosts; and I'll discover their skirts upon thy face, and I'll show the nations their nakedness, and the kingdoms their shame. Moreover, I'll cast abominable filth*

upon thee, and make thee vile, and will set thee as a gazing-stock. And it shall come to pass, that all they that look upon thee shall flee thee...”

Matipa tried hard but in vain to follow the scriptures. The gist evaded her. She wondered if the chaplain was reading from the same Bible everyone read. Her conclusion was that the man was a chaplain by trade, and by nature a vile alarmist. As he preached, she scrutinised the twelve coffins. They were cheap and obvious handiwork of amateur carpenters operating under a tree. The state-sponsored funeral could be easily mistaken for a paupers' burial had it not been for the presence of the Governor and journalists carrying cumbersome electronic cameras on their shoulders.

Mr Artaxerxes Korykos and Gilchrist Keneas attended all the proceedings from the service to the burial. The two men sat among journalists conversing with them in low tones. The journalists took notes and photographed them as the proceedings continued. Twice Matipa saw Mr Keneas pointing at her discreetly. Journalists looked at her and nodded their heads.

She wondered what he was saying to the reporters, but she understood the story of the killed people couldn't be complete without mentioning her husband and her family, and her kidnapped son. Matipa resolved to appear not take any notice.

Ivy was nowhere in sight. Matipa guessed she was at the offices taking care of telephone calls and other important issues.

The DDF lorry carried the bodies to the graveyard. Throngs of mourners, for hundreds had come from neighbouring gold claims and farms, footed alongside the slow-moving lorry to the cemetery. Matipa was in the crowd, a leaf flowing downstream in tumultuous waters. Remegio's father, Mr Boniface Chipendo, was among the mourners too. She spotted him looking at her with intimidating eyes, and understood his anger. Remegio's body still lay unclaimed in the mortuary at Kadoma General Hospital. Compound dwellers said the man had taken to moving around with a three-star Okapi. Since Mr

Chipendo was deliberately refusing to bury his child, she knew the state was going to give the corpse a pauper's burial.

Matipa thought of Stembile, Emedhi's wife detained at Kadoma General Hospital nursing gunshot wounds. Matipa's guess was that doctors would amputate her leg. The community didn't know where to find Vurayai, the adolescent who escaped the killing. She and many people saw him wobbling away. Many people concurred his injuries were grievous. Matipa prayed Vurayai wouldn't turn up dead.

By noon, everyone was at the graveyard. Many people continued to look at Matipa as if she had stricken the dead people herself. Their hatred was palpable. The somnambulant mumbled *twelve* or *Gogo Belemina* within her earshot, shook their heads ruefully and swore under their breath. In all her life, twenty-six years, she had never felt so unwanted. She continued to sob, partly naturally, partly urging herself. Lack of overt remorse on her part could see her mobbed. What pained her was the repulsion she read on the faces and actions of members of her former sect. They openly kept their distance from her. Eyes stubbornly gazed at *Madzibaba* Tinashe's coffin and then glanced at her.

People were too stunned to sing or utter heartfelt eulogies. Most of them merely said "*farewell so-and-so*" and stepped back into the throngs. Long intervals separated the eulogists until an elderly man burdened with beads and amulets stepped forward. Sighing, he looked at the coffins and said, "I'll not say my name because it isn't important. What's important is what I'm about to say."

Necks craned as everyone sought to have a view of the speaker.

"I live in a neighbouring farm." The man went on. "This tragedy reached my ears as it did the ears of many others. I'm neither a priest nor a prophet. But by my assessment Satan had a direct hand in the slaughter." The man was adamant an angel of darkness visited the families and killed anyone amulets, the living-dead or Christ couldn't protect. From the horn of a goat corked into a snuff container, he tapped ground tobacco onto his left palm and sniffed the substance.

His movements were unhurried as if he was both the purpose of the gathering and the guest of honour. "Cleansing rituals must be performed in the compound or evil will strike again. Let me hasten to say, this funeral is a breather, the worst is yet to come."

Many heads nodded in agreement, especially members of the Johannes Masowe sect. Matipa was familiar with the man from the neighbouring farm. Some people believed he was a gifted seer and a dreamer, others thought he was a spirit medium. No one knew in exactitude what he was, except that he was an orator with a propensity to humiliate with words.

Despite the lack of knowledge about exactly what he was, a man of his disposition was feared and commanded respect in the community. He had the potential to bewitch. Because he never spoke scripturally, Matipa regarded him with suspicion, and safely saw him as satanic.

An irate mourner, a close relative of one of the deceased stood up and protested, "Your words go beyond a eulogy. Since you're neither a priest nor a prophet, I suggest you sit down. You've said enough."

"I won't sit down," the digressing eulogist parried. "My speech is in the best interest of all sensible people here. If I were addressing morons only, I'd have sat down in submission to their moronic reasoning. But you'll realise this world isn't only full of people like you who shun the truth and advice, but is endowed with considerate men and women whose natural prerogative is to worry day and night about a better tomorrow and a safe environment. Today sensible people are concerned about global warning. Sorcery and witchcraft occupy us night and day, the reason we attract evil, which leads to destruction. At this rate, it won't be astonishing to find Sakis Mine the centre of a major earthquake someday."

The incensed mourner rushed towards the elder, his fists clenched, but several men intercepted and restrained him. "Respect the dead," the men admonished the interjector.

The elder was unruffled. "Violence killed the twelve. Yet we still have a man in our midst who thinks the violence wasn't enough. Anyway, this is a graveyard, not a boxing arena. I'm old and I'm not a politician, which means I don't stand to gain political mileage or to attract women with my possible oration. As we mourn the dead, we must find wherewithal to face the future and enter tomorrow without fear. Educated people call it *planning*. I'm not educated in the ways of Europeans, which are literal and of no consequence to someone who has never looked up to foreigners or education for a better future. I'm learned in our African ways." He stopped and looked about.

All the people stared at him.

"I say this because I had a dream, a very unpleasant dream," he continued, almost leisurely. "I dreamt of dark birds, perhaps ravens, gathering in the sky over Sakis. Beds of sweet potatoes and cassava mushroomed in many parts of this mine."

Many people murmured that in dreams, beds of any legumes symbolised graves.

"Everyone, including the compound's idiots, can see there's an epidemic of death in this mine." The elder briefly pointed in the direction of the compound. "Don't forget evil spirits and mysterious deaths are cousins. Take heed." He stepped back, nodding and bowing thankfully.

A female mourner shouted, "How do we take heed?"

"When a venomous snake bites a person," the orator said, "people try to remove the venom from the snake bite. When their attempts fail, they take the victim to a specialist in snakebites. He gives the victim concoctions that neutralise the poison. Until someone removes or neutralises the poison, the victim slips towards death. There's poison in the compound of Sakis Mine. We need concerted effort to remove it. Until then, all the people in this area remain in grave danger. The massacre at this mine whose results are in the twelve coffins, are a national disaster. Say I this to the State; today we bury the dead but tomorrow investigate the cause as you do

with all national disasters. Between today and tomorrow, all of us have a responsibility to remove the poison. Thank you.” He blended with the other mourners, so did the man who tried to stop him.

There being no further eulogist, the chaplain prayed for the souls of the dead, reading to God a list of alabaster names. As the sorrowful convicts buried the dead in one straight line, a woman from the sect began singing and many people joined her:

Singer: *Nda-wo-na Dhiona achifamba panyika!*

Chorus: *Ndawona Dhiona*
Achifamba panyika!
Ndawona Dhiona,
Achifamba panyika!

(Singer: I saw the Devil walking in the world!

Chorus: I saw the Devil
He was walking in the world!
I saw the Devil,
He was walking in the world!

When all the dead were in the graves, the convicts stood at a grave each, and shovelled earth into them. After the burial, the prison guards shackled the prisoners. Handcuffed to each other and ambling painfully sideward, like interconnected crabs in linear formation, the bandits invoked in Matipa recollections of paintings of the slave trade.

Her relief came from the realisation that the convicts probably committed atrocious crimes and deserved this treatment. The guards herded the soiled and sweating men to a special closed lorry.

Not long after, the Governor walked to his car, a glistening black Mercedes Benz, his chauffeur leading. When he sat in the car and the

chauffer courteously closed his door for him, the Governor's entourage disbanded and rushed to various cars for departure. When the high-ranking presidential representative sped out of the mine, throngs started dispersing, everyone to their farm or mine. The people didn't talk about the dead, but the *poison*, concurring they had to remove it collectively. Matipa waited for the crowds to leave, their talk was an affront.

Although Matipa was glad the burial and its accompanying ordeal were over, many thoughts encumbered her. Finding Peza's body or burying the head of a goat in lieu of his corpse preoccupied her. She was beginning to think it was wise to leave the mine forthwith and start life afresh without Akar Muja. Yet on the contrary, she was loathsome to leaving, seeing sense in waiting for her husband's return. She would confront him with what she remotely believed was the truth. It appeared there was no hurry for her to leave; she was already a loser and an object of hate. If her husband returned, he could wean her from perpetual mourning by tracking the animal calling itself Bomani Kumanda, pound it into revealing where Peza's remains laid, and decimate it. For the first time, she felt fortuitous to have a perceived brute for a husband.

Suppressing accepting she was the *poison*, she looked squarely at the twelve graves, permanent reminders of the evil her husband attracted to the once peaceful mine, and more tears streamed down her cheeks. Though conflicting resolutions stranded her between staying and leaving, nothing blunted the image of Peza lying on the floor amid broken glass, Bomani towering menacingly over him. Suddenly Remegio's death and the massacre of the twelve overshadowed her son's kidnapping. It agonised her that the Governor and the eulogists didn't mention Peza's name, not even in passing, as if he was a sacrificial fowl in the whole thing. Her thoughts went out to the axed adolescent no one could tell with certainty whether he lived or died.

Her plan for the day was simple. From the graveyard, she would go to Ivy's office and ask for her cellular phone. If the receptionist's mobile phone had no airtime, the young woman would sympathize with her to the extent of availing the landline in the reception. Matipa would call Jasper Gumbo, 'Decapitator of crocodiles'. Thereafter, she would castigate Ivy for sending her to a shameless fornicator in Kadoma.

When Matipa turned to go, she held her bosom and froze. The five paramilitary police officers stood in cow-horn formation a pace from her. One of the men held a pistol pointing downwards. The brutes quickly stepped forward, crushing the pebbles and loose stones in the graveyard under their boots.

Chapter 17

When Binga Jochoma looked down at Sakis Mine, his heart thumped. Hundreds of people were in the open space where Peza and his age mates normally played soccer. In the midst of the people were a lorry and several cars. The vehicles, especially the Mercedes Benz sedan, were in sharp and ill assortment to the dilapidated structures of the dwellings. The character of the compound was different. He brought his pair of binoculars up and watched the strange spectacle through them.

He was behind a bush on the summit of the hill where the apostolic shrine was, and looked down over the veldt at the people gathered in the improvised football pitch. A DDF truck carrying twelve coffins unnerved him. A sleek Mercedes Benz and many government vehicles were testament to the presence of a high-ranking official, most likely a cabinet minister or a provincial governor. In the crowds were police officers, prison guards and convicts. Among the locals, the prisoners were unseemly.

He focused on the five figures that brought a chill in his blood, the paramilitary officers dawdling in the crowds, and wished the men were a fleeting illusion in his mind. The men were real, indifferent to the people around them and ambled with a springy gaiety like tigers set to pounce. Binga didn't like the men whose bodies and spirits they mortgaged to the State; expendable assets the State could send to any war in the world, just or unjustified, to triumph or perish far from home, men set like dogs against him, a fellow man. They looked determined to track him to the edge of the world. As he took in everything, it was apparent something went terribly wrong in the compound, and this was the aftermath of a tragedy.

The rationale behind the presence of the military police eluded him, forcing him to conclude the five men were after him. Their mandate entailed general regulation, hunting and arresting deviant

soldiers and army deserters. In summary, their job was to place a deviant soldier before the Army Tribunal. The tribunal was good at convicting and sentencing to solitary confinement and severe corporal punishment. Binga dreaded the military police. Someone who knew him had let out the truth. The men could only be in the compound to arrest him. Outside the scope, they had no business with the dwellers of Sakis Mine.

He was glad he had practised caution when he alighted from a private car a kilometre from the mine's usual bus stop, and circumvented two farms to approach Sakis Mine from the west. When he boarded the Bulawayo-bound car in Harare, he had a hunch something was wrong. Now as he peered at the gathered people through the pair of binoculars, he attributed the premonition to the charms and spells that were his life and the mainstay thereof. He was glad he had heeded the voiceless voice in him that had bided him practise caution in his advent.

Although it was his norm to leave the mine unannounced and to return unexpected and from an unlikely direction, this morning it was a strong premonition that steered him, the effect compounded by a general absence of people in the maize fields and settlements he passed through. The few people he came across either looked at him strangely or fled. Compounds that used to bustle with people and regurgitate drumbeats and laughter were quiet and seemingly abandoned. Above the prompt, caution was something militarily engrained in him; a result of combative training and tried and tested survival tactics gained from the DRC campaign. He shunned the footpaths and kept to the woods until he climbed the hill. The shrine was deserted and slightly overgrown.

On the hill, a hint to the puzzle laid below him, the hundreds of people gathered in the pitch. People had left their dwellings in the surrounding gold claims and farms to mourn the dead at Sakis, which sprang many questions he couldn't answer. What had happened? Who were the dead? Were his wife and son among the dead?

As the convicts offloaded the coffins from the lorry, he systematically scanned the people through the binoculars, and saw Matipa. Immediately he zoomed on her, but could only see the back part of her head and the side of her face. It unsettled him that she was in a multi-coloured dress and a floral headscarf, not the garbs stipulated by her faith. When she turned her head, he had a close-up of her face. Tears streamed down her face. Her cheeks and temples were sunken. She looked dejected and frightened. He searched for Peza, a montage of familiar faces racing across the binoculars' lens. The boy was nowhere, so were many children. Funerals were out of bounds to children, a dictate of custom and tradition.

After an executive figure took the floor and addressed the mournful gathering, a chaplain preached for a while, the man's gestures and mouth said so. Then the coffins were loaded onto the DDF lorry. The gathering, now a funeral procession, left for the graveyard near the obelisk, which was significantly closer to the hill where Binga was. The convicts offloaded the coffins again and lined them against dug graves. Then the eulogists stepped forward one after the other. As they did so, he saw that the five soldiers in red berets and camouflage were moving through the gathering from various positions. Initially, the paramilitary officers seemed to be leaving the graveyard in different directions. Then they converged and re-entered the gathering, this time behind unsuspecting Matipa, and stood behind her in an inescapable semi-circle, a human net.

When the burial was over, the soldiers pounced on her, one holding her by the wrist, the other the collar of her dress, but only for a while. She didn't resist. They escorted her to her house like a dangerous criminal. As she stood on the threshold unlocking the door, Akar deduced Peza couldn't be in a locked house. Matipa and the soldiers vanished inside.

Where was Peza? Binga swept the compound's open spaces and failed to see the boy. The possibility his son was among the dead tortured him before he found relief in the size of the twelve coffins—

they were for adults. On second thought, he knew it was possible for the government to bury a minor in an oversize coffin.

Matipa and the five men were in the house for about an hour. When the soldiers emerged, Mr Gilchrist Keneas quickly led three reporters to the house. One of the journalists carried a video camera on his shoulder. The mill manager knocked on the door. Matipa opened the door slightly and poked her head outside.

Akar was relieved to see she had no bruises and her tears had dried; a good sign the soldiers didn't beat her to a pulp. Opening the door wider, she beckoned them in and closed the door. About forty minutes passed. Then the journalists and Mr Keneas issued out. The reporters gratefully shook the mill manager's hand and went to their waiting vehicles as Mr Keneas walked across the compound on his way to the office building.

Soon after, Matipa came out of the house, adjusting her floral headscarf. Binga noticed she had changed into another dress, multi-coloured and averse to her faith and beliefs.

Chapter 18

A hearty gush of warm air swept through the compound as Matipa made her way out of the compound to the office building. This day, 10 December, just like 29 November, was painfully unforgettable to her. She couldn't believe five paramilitary officers had just interviewed her at gunpoint in the privacy of her house, and threatened to shoot her in the head over the suspicion her husband was Binga Jochoma.

They claimed she was knowingly harbouring a wanted man and demanded to know where he had gone to and when he would return. Because she was adamant, Akar Muja was Akar Muja and the fugitive Binga Jochoma was Binga Jochoma, her answers didn't please them. They screamed questions in her ears and pinned her to the floor, her underwear showing. The man holding the pistol to her head expressed frustration and cocked the weapon. One of the men asked her to say a quick prayer. She mumbled the Lord's Prayer between gnashing teeth.

As soon as she said *amen*, they asked her the same repertoire of questions: where's Binga? Where does he hide? Who're his bitches? What're their cell numbers and addresses? Do you realise by lying to us you're breaching the law? What name is on your husband's ID? Who is his next of kin?

The questions were endless, and her responses infuriated them. In-between the questions, they called her all sorts of names, from lousy lizard to scum and bitch. Finally, the pistol holder pressed the muzzle hard against her temple. Matipa's lips moved, wordlessly pleading her innocence and ignorance of the Binga they were out to arrest. The man pulled the trigger. The pistol clicked. She cringed and wet her clothes. There was no bullet in its chamber.

Then suddenly they picked her from the floor, straightened her clothes sympathetically and set her in a sofa.

“Take it easy,” the leader said, squatting before her and looking into her eyes squarely. His voice was solicitous, like one proposing love. “There’re chances this husband of yours lied to you too. It’s very possible. However, I want you to know he’s a very dangerous man. Binga is a killer that’s why the army sent killers to bring him to book. He’ll kill you if he learns you spoke to us. That’s how trained men of his calibre cover their spoors. When he walks into this house, make sure you alert the mine owner or Mr Keneas. That’s the only sure way you can protect yourself from this monster.” He straightened and bowed slightly. “Have a good day, madam.”

The soldiers left. She mopped a pool of her urine on the floor. When she finished there was a knock on the door. Finding a wrapper on one of the sofas, she wound it around her waistline and sank in the nearest sofa. Mr Keneas and three journalists entered. One of the journalists was male. They found her stunned and tense, impenetrable, stagnant tears standing on the rims of her eyes. Her limbs and ribs hurt. From the sofa she couldn’t rise, lest they’d see she had wet herself.

The reporters started by expressing their sorrow over her son’s kidnapping, their words a heartfelt relief. In their empathy, they guessed right that she was probably going through a torrid time of her life. As she wiped her tears, she warmed to them until they were free to interview her. They begged her to be at liberty to talk to them about Peza, her husband and Bomani Kumanda. They said her plight needed publicity and assured her the story would appear on the main news bulletins on national television and radio, both ZBC and Channel 2 News, the state-run *Herald* and a couple of independent newspapers. Such publicity would rouse some scouts, vigilantes or the army into hunting the kidnapper and his henchmen, and boost her son’s chances of people finding him dead or alive.

This was what she was dying to hear ever since the abduction. With cameras and hand-held tape-recorders rolling, she answered all their questions and capped everything with the torture she just went

through at the hands of the military men. Tears stood in the eyes of the female journalists by the time she finished, and the lounge reeked of urine. Mr Keneas never uttered a word. He simply sat in a sofa, pensive and sorrowful at the same time until he led the journalists out.

That was behind Matipa now. Contacting Jasper was pertinent. She would ask for Ivy's mobile phone or use the mine's landline to call her brother, and then she would confront Ivy with the truth. The receptionist-cum-clerk had to be ashamed of herself and her Nigerian pastor.

As she walked past the mill now standing dormant after almost a fortnight of inactivity following the disturbances, she surmised it was possible Pastor Ojo Ojele had also been under Ivy's mini-skirts. There were chances the ugly and sickeningly slim young woman was pregnant with her pastor's seed.

Perhaps the church was one of those pagan ones that kept temple prostitutes, baby-making machines whose bastard offspring they burnt on the altar in the name of Molech, a fire god, the abomination of the children of Ammon. Possibly the Nigerian in his greed for power and respect among his congregants worshipped the same god; otherwise she couldn't grasp how a right thinking pastor could knowingly defile the baptismal pool. However, recollection of the empty condom packet floating on the water checked her thoughts; a man bent on siring children shunned contraception.

Shortly she was walking through the gates in the high security fence around the office building, the former farmhouse, and had to stand aside as Mr Artaxerxes Korykos drove out of the premises in an exclusive BMW sedan, followed by the mill manager in his red jeep Cherokee. The men waved at her. She waved back and crossed to the reception's double doors, glad the two men had left. Ivy and she would've ample time to talk freely without the former suffering reprisals for engaging in personal discussions, or arguments for that matter, during working hours. Matipa was blind to the beauty of the

flowers in the manicured gardens. The gardener, pruning a rose plant, hesitantly waved at her. She waved back, non-committal. Perhaps he was one of the people Ivy said were vying for her immediate eviction.

Sight of the splendid rockery that led to the solving of the *déjà vu* again reminded her of the dream featuring Akar Muja with Peza on his back and thirteen scarlet roses on his head. She decided to speculate her husband would come with their son on his back, an abject denial of facts on the ground.

Matipa walked into the reception and found Ivy on her desk. A shiver of resentment ran through her when she laid her eyes on the tall and slender woman. Ivy was in a sleeveless sky-blue ruffle blouse, silver bangles, a multi-chained and jewelled brooch, and a golden necklace holding a green precious stone. Pink sunglasses hung over her forehead, their arms concealed in the thick logs of cascading artificial hair sewn onto her overnight. As usual, her make-up was outlandish. Ivy rose to shake her hand. Matipa noticed she was in a denim mini-skirt and black leggings, and stifled showing the receptionist the character of her clothes wasn't mournful in accordance with the mood of the day.

"How're you, Mrs Muja," she said, extending a hand. "I hope God gave you the grace to meet the Man of God yesterday."

Matipa took her hand, a waft of Ivy's perfume stinging her olfactory nerves. "I'm trying to be fine under the circumstances. Can we talk about the Man of God later, please? I came to ask to use your personal phone. I need to contact my brother."

"Um," the receptionist said, urging her to disclose more.

"He's one man I know who can sniff Bomani out of any hiding place. He can bring my son back dead or alive."

"Please, sit down."

Matipa sat in a visitor's chair facing the desk.

"There's a Godly purpose and plan in the whole thing, ugly as it is," Ivy said factually. Sitting down and opening her handbag on the desk, she fumbled inside and continued speaking, to her visitor's

irritation, “*All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who’re the called according to his purpose.*”

The biblical quotation, issuing from the mouth of a person of Ivy’s standing, a possible devil worshipper masquerading as a Christian, irked Matipa to the marrow in her bones. She shook her head in unveiled annoyance, her assumed composure rupturing. “You shouldn’t be quoting the Holy Bible, Ivy, I’m sorry to say. You and your Nigerian pastor have no business with God and the Bible. The Nigerian is a hypocrite.”

A cell phone was now in Ivy’s hand, which froze in the act of handing it to her visitor. “What’re you talking about, Mrs Muja? You’ve no right to judge. And *hypocrite* is too strong a word.”

Matipa laughed drily. “What about *fornicator*? Why did you send me to a fornicator?”

“Do I hear you right? What’re you talking about, Mrs Muja?”

“I found your Pastor O, the great Man of God of yours, making love to a woman in the baptismal pool.”

“Don’t tell me!”

“I’m telling you. I saw him with my eyes. I found them naked. What sacrilege!”

Ivy leaned back in her chair and sighed. She was quiet and motionless for a very long while. “Pastor Ojele can be naughty and sinful at times. It actually confirms some adulterous rumours about him.”

“So you knew?”

“No, Mrs Muja. To be honest, like many congregants, I suspected.” Then she fixed a doubtful eye on her. “Was it really him? Can you be sure beyond reasonable doubt you saw him?”

“He’s tattooed and in his mid-thirties. Muscular and light in complexion.”

“That’s not conclusive, Mrs Muja. Many men are muscular and tattooed.”

“A beggar by the church gate, a giant of a man, came to a window and called out your pastor by name. Pastor Ojele said he wasn’t done with the woman and pleaded for time. It’s a shame, Ivy.”

At a loss, the receptionist held her chin and scratched it. “Did he see you?”

“No, he was immersed in the act.” Ivy gave her a blank look, inducing her to add, “The woman was probably a whore.”

Ivy leaned forward, wore a bold face and grinned. “And all the while you were looking? You should’ve minded your own business, Mrs Muja. I don’t suppose you’re by any chance into voyeurism.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean, Ivy?”

“You intruded. You’d no right to intrude. It’s neither Christian nor civilised to intrude. You should’ve waited outside on the bench by the entrance. In the right season, after being done with the woman, the Man of God would’ve fetched or sent for you.”

“Excuse me! You think I was going to let such a despicable character lay his hands on me. Adulterers and fornicators have no inheritance in Heaven.”

“It’s written: *Gifts and callings are without repentance*. Proverbs says, *But whoso committeth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding; he that does it destroyeth his own soul*. It’s the soul of the adulterer and no one else’s that’s destroyed.”

“That’s a satanic interpretation of scriptures!”

Ivy shrugged. “That’s the Word of God for you and me, Mrs Muja. At the right time, you should’ve entered the church and Pastor Ojo Ojele would’ve delivered you. His unrighteousness has nothing to do with anybody except God. Contrary to the scriptures, we judge others. No wonder we miss the mark.”

“Don’t tell me your church tolerates adultery.”

“If you can be like a child, go back to the tabernacle. Pastor Ojo Ojele, that very Nigerian whose nudity you saw with your eyes, will deliver you.” The telephone on her desk rang. Raising a silencing hand to Matipa, she picked the receiver and spoke into it. “Sakis

Mine, good afternoon... I'm sorry he isn't *in*... Mr Korykos isn't *in* either. The gentlemen have gone out for lunch, sir. They'll probably be back after about an hour. Can I take a message, sir?" Listening, she scribbled a message on a pad, thanked the caller and cradled the receiver. "Well, Mrs Muja, where were we?" Something crossed her mind and she beamed a smile at Matipa, "I suppose you read the tabernacle's signboard. What did it say?"

"It said *Tabernacle...Joppa International Ministries* or something like that. Why?"

"Honestly that's not all, Mrs Muja."

"Yes. There's a chapter and a verse from the Book of Jonah. Why?"

"Jonah 2 verse 8. That verse was prophetically posted on the signboard for believers of your mentality."

"What does the verse say?"

"Those that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy."

Matipa didn't know what to say, her conviction the church, its pastor and congregation were satanic was falling apart. "I'm beginning to see that your pastor fooled you, the Norwegians, the Germans, the Australians and whoever helped him build that tabernacle. He's a lustful conman. I don't want to imagine what he could've done to me had I found him alone in that church."

"You're shouting, Mrs Muja. Keep your voice down."

"Because you aren't even apologetic, and like the Devil, you reason, Ivy. Satan appeals to reason. By reasoning he tempted Christ."

"The same Christ taught us looking lustfully at a person was equivalent to committing adultery. If upon seeing Pastor Ojele's nudity you didn't desire him to make love to you, then you're an upright person before God and man. A person of such uprightness has no need for deliverance. Salvation and victory are yours on a platter."

For close to a minute, they stared at each other in silence, like fighters trying to psyche the other.

Ivy broke the impasse. "On arrival you asked to use my phone." She picked the cell phone she had placed on the desk near her handbag. "Here it is, Mrs Muja."

Matipa received the handset and immediately poked Jasper's mobile number into it. An automated female voice regretted the subscriber wasn't reachable, and advised her to try later. She kept trying the number. The voice became a faint jingle in the reception.

Chapter 19

The sun was scorching when Bomani Kumanda told his men he was going to spend the rest of the afternoon in meditation and prayer at a hillock to the north. He took his leave.

As he circumvented numerous camps for other *Gule Wamkulu* practitioners scattered in the forest, he thought of Peza. His team and he were getting tired of minding the boy. Extracting him from the warren three times a day for him to answer to the calls of nature were proving exerting, and their food provisions were running out. Eleven days had lapsed since he kidnapped the boy. Two days from now, on 12 December, the annual *Gule Wamkulu* tournament would begin in earnest. Of course, he wasn't in the outskirts of Patchway Mine for the tournament, but to rendezvous with his rival.

He had hoped by now he would've settled the score with Binga Jochoma, killed or recruited him for the grand diamond robbery at Chiadzwa. Things weren't going according to plan. By now, if Binga had surrendered himself and swallowed his pride by submitting without a fight, he could've been sitting with his former rival and polishing the practical details of the robbery. The eve of the coming year was supposed to find him in Chapola Village, the land of his ancestors in the district of Salima in Malawi's Central Province.

Bomani wasn't the kind of a man who walked with his head bowed even if things weren't going according to plan. He held his head high glad he spoke spirit-laden words in the compound of Sakis Mine. Indeed, he was juju-dependant, but there was power in the spoken word. He hadn't uttered the words in vain. The dwellers of the compound and Binga's family wouldn't taste peace until his prey presented itself.

Having trained as a Catholic priest and come close to ordination, he understood what the scriptures said about the power of the tongue. Goliath of Gath uttered empty threats to the army of Israel,

but David prophesied the giant's death and believed the words he had spoken.

Bomani knew by uttering he had potentiated his spells over Sakis. Binga's wife was petrified. He capitalised on her fear, the anchorage for his juju. The more she relived his words, the more she potentiated the spells and risked everyone's life. As he walked, snakes of all kinds scampered from his advent, a sign his gods were with him.

There were chances Binga had long returned to his house, Bomani reasoned. It appeared the ex-commando was too scared to come for his son, and was passively sacrificing the boy. He didn't want to dwell on speculation. Neither did he want to believe an ex-commando could be too afraid to come for his son. A feeling assured him Binga would come. He imagined the fistfight that would ensue. The second encounter and the fight wouldn't be for the faint hearted. When a mongoose fought a cobra, victory could go in any direction. For Bomani to win, the gods had to smile at him; hence the venue in a bushy plain littered with old graves and pregnant with fresh charms.

Something tragic was definitely unfolding at Sakis Mine. His bones told him so, but everything had to have a time limit to make business sense and to be definable as a project. On the first day of the *gule* competition, he would physically return to the mine, cause more mayhem and shed more blood. If need be, he would've to burn the boy alive in the compound as recompense for his custody of the child. If indeed Binga had sacrificed his son, it had to please the father to see his offering go up in smoke. His covenant with *Gule Wamkulu* spirits was one of blood, the flow thereof at any time would assuage his gods.

In the meantime, he would pass 10 December in meditation and prayer while sitting on a hillock and watch for signs in the clouds. There were chances pied crows would appear. Anything was possible to a supernatural man.

I'm not of this world, he said within as he trudged. In the sky, he noticed traces of dark birds. *God gave us dominion over everything.*

Twenty minutes later, he reached the hillock, took out a sachet of ashes from a hip pocket and removed all his clothes. Every area on his body he could reach with his hands, he smeared with the ashes. Ashen and ghostly, he sat cross-legged on the peak of the hillock, a fiery motionless figure in a forest. Hissing reddish ants crept all over him, but none bit him. *God gave us dominion over all things.*

To attract the sympathy of his ancestors and gods, he relived his life from the day he left for the Catholic chapel in the next village about ten kilometres from theirs. This was exactly two days after the burial of his mother, Cheruna who wadded into Lake Malawi at daybreak and drowned exactly thirteen weeks after disclosing to him how their father, Cholooka, became *gule*. He recollected his fear and vulnerability to *Gule Wamkulu* spirits.

He remembered kneeling in the dirt before the priest, Fr Pengani Phiri. He was hardly eighteen, and therefore a certifiable orphan. His sister was in Europe. He hated to imagine what occupied Benita abroad. Indifferent goats watched the spectacle when he begged to become a baptised and confirmed Roman Catholic. The priest welcomed him like a returnee prodigal son. Twice a week, Bomani trudged to the church for three months, to learn the catechism, hymns and the Roman liturgies. The priest assigned him a godfather from Chapola Village.

The godfather loved him more than his own father ever did. He taught him simple prayers, the rosary and about coming of age and marriage. At the church, his catechism mentor steadily tutored him on the importance of the local priest and the subsequent hierarchy to the Pontiff in Rome. Playing priest, the mentor taught him how to respond to greetings from the pulpit, the three penitential rites, the liturgy of the Word, the Apostles' Creed and the profession of faith. The man helped him memorise Eucharistic prayers and recite the Lord's Prayer in the ecumenical version punctuated by the priest's urgings. Bomani impressed both his mentor and godfather. At the

end of three months, he proved excellent in his studies and was baptised.

Bomani Kumanda revered the Eucharist. He was such an exuberance of biblical verses that he mesmerised many believers. Having accepted that Communion was the heart and lifeblood of the Eucharist, he believed no evil would touch him. Fastidious with himself, Bomani took the extra step of becoming a server in the church. Weekly proximity to Fr Pengani Phiri in his eye-catching robes, pose, gaiety and humility raised Bomani's aspirations. Within the year, with the priest's approval and certification in the form of a letter of recommendation signed by both his mentor and godfather, Bomani applied to the St Joseph Catholic Seminary in Thyolo, Malawi, to train as priest.

Two months later, he walked through the gates of the seminary in Thyolo, about fifty kilometres to the south of Blantyre. Catching sight of its magnificent flower gardens juxtaposed with white buildings of Edwardian and Victorian architecture, he had felt like one walking deeper into the spiritual realm, a heavenly visitor in the main foyer of the nine heavens. He knew that in the seminary the long hand of the Devil he dreaded so much wouldn't reach him.

In his first year at the seminary, he had the good fortune to be among the handful to tour Rome and the Vatican City. The Roman tour was a spirit-lifting experience capped by an anticlimax he wouldn't forget in a long while. Rome's historical buildings were both a spiritual and academic treasure. Italy and Rome's castles and villas, the Tiber River, St Peter's Square, the Sistine Chapel and the ancient sculptures and paintings he saw, were a permanent mural on his mind. However, there was Brother Filippo, the second tour guide who took over from the Roman. There was no way he could forget in a hurry the Italian guide in the olive three-piece suit and beige necktie, the man who worked in the curator's office, the man who appraised him more than he did the others.

Unknown to anybody, Brother Filippo, the good Catholic eloquent in English and Spanish, clandestinely invited Bomani to his private quarters at night. In the privacy of his bedroom, Brother Filippo drugged and sodomised him. The act was a hint to Bomani he wasn't beyond the reach of the long hand of the Devil. The tour guide threatened him with death and expulsion from St Joseph Seminary if he puffed a word to anyone.

Bomani told no one about the abuse. He had to remain focused and steadfast in his studies for three years and two years of fellowship before he could be ordained. Then he would work for many years, perhaps ten or more, as a curate. Perhaps after ordination he would be fortunate enough to go to Rome for further studies. Then he could be rector or vicar to a parish of his own in Argentina, Canada or anywhere in the world.

In the twilight of his envisaged fruitful Catholic life, retirement from active involvement with the Church would naturally follow. He would become pastor emeritus, with curates as his assistants. The curates would busy themselves with the spadework around the altar and leave the fine touches to him. He would answer to the title Monsignor, and be affectionately known as Monsignor Bomani. After ordination he could be sent abroad to join the order of St Francis in the vaults of the Vatican, to become a friar. The rest of his life he would spend in a brown habit, a cowl and heavy woollen socks, studying all the Catholic popes and their citations. Chanting prayers in the same tomb as St Peter's relics, no *Gule Wamkulu* devil would ever touch or disturb him.

At the end of the day, when he was all wrinkles, and God smiled at him, he would become the first black pope, Papa Bomani. He always wondered how he would look in a topaz and papal regalia. The world would've to get used to a black pope standing on the St Peter's balcony. To any man with faith and trust in God, he knew, anything was achievable. A black resident could occupy the papal apartments on the uppermost floor of the Vatican, and the Gondolfo

Castle. To achieve that, Bomani had renounced the world, the cravings of the flesh, and Satan with all his sundry forms and names, bowing to a strong sense of self-preservation and trust in the Lord.

Unknown to him, despair and frustration awaited him. On the eve of his ordination at the end of three years as a seminarian, when he was twenty-one years old, he went to the dormitory quarters of a close brother to wish him well in his new life as an associate priest beginning the following day. He found the brother in the company of four other brothers watching a DVD on a laptop on his bed. The brother, a cousin to a Malawian diplomat serving in France, was the owner of the computer he had smuggled into the seminary. The brothers, heads together, were engrossed in a video and hardly acknowledged his greetings.

Bomani had the shock of his life when he looked at the screen. A high-definition pornographic video was playing. Five bearded men dressed as highway motorcycle gangsters, two white and three black, were making love to a black slender woman. Bomani counted five customised Harley-Davidson motorcycles around the actors. The woman lay on a low-lying gym bench in a carpeted room. Her groans were agonised. The men shared a bottle of whisky as they violated her, their vigour never diminishing. When a close-up of her face appeared, Bomani froze and recoiled. The face was too familiar for his comfort. The woman was his sister, Benita. There was no mistake about it. Bomani uttered no word and left for his quarters. Tears stood in his eyes.

He didn't know how to deal with the situation. That night, he couldn't sleep. Benita's sensual noises rang in his ears like the cries of bats. With his eyes closed, he continued to see her intimate parts and close-ups of their depths. The images ceaselessly tormented him.

The next day, a seminary minibus took the associate priests-to-be, ten brothers, to a cathedral in the heart of Blantyre, the venue for the mass ordination. A white archbishop presided at the ceremony. Several high-ranking priests from the country's provinces graced the

occasion in breathtaking apparels. When Bomani was set to be ordained, he suddenly felt faint and dizzy. Holding his head, he staggered from the queue of fellow seminarians. The colourful ceremony swayed in his eyes. Brotherly, many priests rushed to set him down in a front pew. The disturbance to proceedings was brief. After gaining reasonable composure, he rejoined the queue. When his turn came, he presented himself to the presiding archbishop. Solemnly he took the three vows, of celibacy, poverty to material riches and of perpetual engagement to Christ.

As he pronounced the vows, his heart thumped. Sweat beads stood on his face. A strange feeling nagged him. He thought he heard the sizzling howl of a great whirlwind. In the depths of his ears, the sound changed to *Gule Wamkulu* drumbeat and shrill *Uho-u* cries. He raised his hands to cover his ears, but something akin to a gush of air took possession of his senses and reflexes. As the archbishop stepped down from a dais to find out if he was all right, he punched the priest squarely on the mouth, knocking out two of his incisors. The priest fell backwards, crunching on the altar and sending to the floor its golden and silvery appointments.

Parishioners jumped to their feet in the galleries. Bomani flung on the bleeding priest and squatted on his chest. Before many hands could pull him from the poor archbishop, he had punched him several times in the face, breaking his nose and tearing the skin around his eyes. He overpowered the men restraining him and began renting his priestly garments down to his underwear until he stood naked on the pulpit. Women and children in the packed cathedral screamed and ran towards the exits.

Thereafter whoever he caught in the head with a clenched fist lost consciousness. All the men in the cathedral failed to contain him until someone called the nearest police station. The station despatched six riot police officers who found Bomani flooring his victims. They cornered him in the cathedral and thrashed him with

truncheons until priests intervened and explained the problem was more demonic than criminal.

Bomani remembered the white archbishop administering holy oil on him with blood dripping from the gaps in his jaw, the police officers holding him down. He was still semi-naked, unashamed and vying to fight, but oil drained Bomani of strength until he laboured to breathe and passed out. He slid into another realm, of graves and masked *gule* dancers. Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima, Salima district's chief *Gule Wamkulu* practitioners, reigned in that realm. He danced around the grave members of the secret society interred his father's remains overnight.

The next thing he remembered was running amok in the busy streets and avenues of Blantyre, a gazing and laughing stock. At times, teams of Catholic priests and ordinary volunteers overpowered and brought him to the cathedral for prayers and clothing. The alleys of the city became his home for four months until word reached his late father's young brother, Uncle Pazomba; the gardener in Dowa. Together with Auntie Chaiwe, they chained him with the assistance of the public and brought him howling to the ruins of their family home in Chapola Village.

The drumbeats and *gule* shouts he heard in his head turned him into a nervous wreck. He heard sympathizers from the village advising Pazomba and Chaiwe to seek the help of seers and sorcerers. His uncle and aunt had no money to their names. They sold the burnt tractor's plough and disc harrow and embarked on consulting reputable mediums with the proceeds. Most of the seers talked about inheritance. They said a father blessed his first child on passing on, and prescribed that they dig open Cholooka grave and its contents, apart from relics, and hand them to Bomani.

Three weeks after Bomani Kumanda was brought back to the land of his ancestors, Chief Chapola sanctioned the exhumation of Cholooka's grave on condition Umi Chin'onon'ono and Joseph Chimsima presided at the ceremony, which entailed full-fledged *Gule*

Wamkulu participation. The ceremony started at night, to rouse the gods and the spirits, though the exhumation proper would take place at daybreak. Many masked dancers attended. Because of the publicity and mysterious nature of Bomani's insanity, many villagers including some from neighbouring ones came to witness the event, hoping for a spectacle. The majority of people came to see a shackled ordained Catholic priest harassed by spirits.

As a maroon hue lit the eastern horizon, Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima removed their shirts and applied ashes on their heads, faces and upper bodies until they were ghostly. They singled out two *gule* elders, shaved them bald, half-stripped and smeared them with ashes from their heads to the waistline, and instructed them to dig Cholooka's grave.

People fell silent from fear and expectation. Because this was about three years after the burial and the earth hadn't formed hard clay sediments, the diggers were in no time knee-deep and shovelling as religiously as ever. Rivulets of sweat washed some of the ashes off their bodies and strangely patterned the diggers. A woman tried to break the silence with a song, but Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima abruptly silenced her with gestures.

When the diggers neared the remains of the dead man, they began scooping earth mingled with strips of red clothes and fowl feathers, indications of rituals performed during burial. Not long after, the men climbed out of the grave and stood aside. With great effort, Chin'onon'ono lowered Chimsima into the grave, and received from the latter a cumbersome parcel neatly wrapped in a black hide. Chin'onon'ono set the parcel on the mound of earth by the graveside and pulled Chimsima out.

The two leaders sat on the ground and uncovered the parcel together. A wooden *gule* mask, colourful and menacing, was in the hide. Together, the leaders took the mask to Bomani shackled to a tree nearby. As Chimsima unshackled Bomani, Chin'onon'ono addressed everyone, "I, Umi Chin'onon'ono, declare this to you: if

the mask is Bomani's inheritance, the young man won't bolt or attack anyone. He'll receive it with humility."

Onlookers scared of Bomani's tremendous strength, sprinting agility and unlimited violence, quickly left the ceremony. The sun had broken from the eastern horizon and was seemingly smiling at the gathering and Chapola Village when Chin'onon'ono presented the mask to a kneeling Bomani without incident, and the crowd responded by whistling, ululating and thundering *Gule Wamkulu* drums.

Chief Chapola ordered two of his cattle slaughtered. Well-wishers pledged gourds of opaque beer. Members of the cult feasted for the rest of the day at Bomani's parental home. People celebrated the fact that Choolooka had refused to die and was reborn. They sang that only Europeans and foolish people died, but Choolooka wasn't in their ranks.

Chin'onon'ono and Chimsima gave Bomani a second name: Kumanda. They said it was his link with the spiritual world and Lake Malawi. A person favoured and recruited into the secret society that way had no need for coaching and *gule* discourses conducted in the cemeteries. Bomani was slightly over twenty-one years then. The elders deplored him to a village in Nkhotakota along the lake. In the remote village, he was supposed to find a wife and live his new life there with honour, arguing paradoxically a prophet had no honour among his people.

For five years, he lived in rural Nkhotakota, dancing and performing rituals in graveyards, and sleeping at liberty with the wives of fellow *gule* practitioners whenever the urge took him. Often they quenched his thirst with their wives' menstrual blood. Availing one's wife of her menstrual blood was a sign of love and fraternity. As he sank deeper into the world of spirits, he couldn't help cursing God, the Catholic Church and the Eucharist that had failed to protect him. Throughout his stay at the seminary, he guessed he had consumed enough sanctified wine to replace his blood, but it all came

to nought. He saw that Christianity and Catholicism had given him a false sense of protection, like a condom.

In the sixth year, a messenger from Chief Chapola came looking for him in Nkhotakota. He bore bad news. Benita was dead and her body was at the neglected parental homestead in Chapola Village. He also informed him that thieves broke into the parental homestead several times and stole almost everything from pots to furniture. Bomani journeyed with the messenger by bus to the land of his ancestors.

Indeed Benita was dead. He found a fresh grave where the community had dutifully interred her remains afraid her body was decomposing. The story was that a government hearse on the orders of the Malawian embassy in France ferried her corpse from an airport in Lilongwe soon after its arrival. An official from the Department of Foreign Affairs in Lilongwe who accompanied the body from the city also brought a suitcase with some of her belongings. Bomani was glad the community buried his sister before his arrival. Memories of her contemptible pornographic acts were still vivid in his mind despite the insanity he suffered for four months.

Chief Chapola gave Bomani the suitcase and expressed his condolences, hastily adding he didn't have to grieve much for his sister since she wasn't *family*. She wasn't *gule*; hence, she had died prematurely. The chief also gave him a sealed khaki envelope stamped: AUTOPSY REPORT. Bomani took the items to his late father's homestead. The hut and the brick-house were falling apart. The place was overgrown and desolate. The cooking hut, with its thatched roof curved in, reminded him of the death of his father. Under a tree, which jogged his recollection of Cheruna's grave illness, he struggled with the urge to tear the autopsy report to pieces without reading it, but gave in to curiosity. He tore open the envelope and scanned for the part where it stated the cause of death:

1) *Extra pulmonary cryptococcosis, pneumocystis pneumonia and meningitis (complications arising from AIDS)*

2) *Subarachnoid haemorrhaging (arising from incurable veterinary diseases prevalent in dogs)*

Bomani frowned and tore the report and another document attached to it.

He opened the suitcase and went through its contents. Hoping to find a bundle of euro or usable bankcards and their pin codes, he rummaged through lingerie, dresses, and Benita's photographs in scanty clothes, bikinis and in the nude, various wigs and many feminine effects, which Bomani simply threw away. On reaching the bottom and every corner of the suitcase, he sighed with frustration, and left the village with the suitcase for the town of Salima.

Late that afternoon, he sold the suitcase and its contents to a flea-market vendor for an amount equivalent to a week's wage for a general labourer, and then he proceeded happily to Nkhotakota. He didn't even stand at his sister's grave or look at it from a distance. He found it beneath him to honour a dog.

However, at the age of twenty-six he was tired of his happiness. He was tired of sleeping with other people's wives, youthful and elderly, pretty and ugly. Of drinking menstrual blood and spending sleepless nights in graveyards, he was tired. Of conversing with his dead father, he was weary. His face hurt from wearing different masks. Venereal diseases had scarred and disfigured his manhood. He was tired of shedding tears every time he passed urine. Dancing for beer and a pittance tired him. When he was renamed Kumanda, he thought his new life would be fraught with honour, health and prosperity. Time proved he was wrong and he had to move on. The safest way forward would be to move on without denouncing *Gule Wamkulu*.

In the middle of the night, he boarded a steam ferry which took him and his few possessions past Salima to Mangochi in Southern

Malawi. As someone without any travel documents, he used money and his possessions to bribe his entry into Mozambique. By late afternoon, he was on a bus passing through Tete in Mozambique on his way to Zimbabwe, a country of untapped diamonds and sprawling gold belts. On the night of the second day, he swam across the crocodile and hippopotami-infested Gairezi River into Zimbabwe.

His destination was the Chiadzwa diamond fields. Malawian television reports said chaos reigned supreme in the virgin fields. Thousands of ordinary Zimbabweans and Mozambicans had descended on Marange Communal Lands. Cutthroat thugs and robbers were among the thousands. Soldiers shot the illegal diggers from helicopters. On the ground, police officers on horseback patrolled the vast fields. The police's Dog Unit was also in full force, the dogs maiming and mauling many people to death.

Precarious as it sounded, Bomani hoped to capitalise on the anarchy. *Gule Wamkulu* spirits and gods would aid him. For five years, he had been obedient to them. They just had to be obliged to bend to his whims, and he would be rich beyond comparison. When he reached the fields, he saw he had to be more brutal, more tactful and organised than he had anticipated.

Chapter 20

After supper, Matipa sat tacit in a sofa, thinking. One thing was clear in her mind; she wasn't going back to adulterous Pastor Ojo Ojele's tabernacle in Kadoma, whatever the eighth verse of the second chapter of Jonah implied or meant. Outside, an owl hooted continuously.

Her continued stay in the compound roused more chagrin by the day. As it were, many people had died and the general perception obtaining was that Bomani would slaughter more people one way or the other. The controversial eulogist had said it. Tomorrow, 11 December, she would find a suitable place in the local graveyard and dig a grave. Whoever tried to stop her would meet her wrath. Then she would look for a goat to buy whose head she would bury. With Peza symbolically buried, perhaps turmoil would leave her mind and she would be able to think more logically. Perhaps after the burial she would consider leaving Sakis Mine.

Who was this Binga Jochoma? Could her husband by some chance be the man the soldiers wanted to arrest? Bomani started a simple chain that led to the police. The police informed the army. It continued to puzzle her why Bomani Kumanda came looking for him, and why he had the temerity to set a person on fire and kidnap Peza. Somewhere in their two rooms had to be something enciphered about Akar Muja, something that would demystify everything, or at least prove whether Akar Muja was indeed Binga Jochoma. There just had to be some document or something that revealed his identity.

Where would she start? Although she was familiar with every item in the house, when she went through a mental inventory of everything in their two rooms, she saw that she wasn't quite familiar with the things stuffed in two sacks in the bedroom. After making sure she had locked and latched the main door, she went into the

bedroom and overturned one of the hessian bags on the floor. Dust stung her nostrils and she doubled and sneezed, her eyes watering.

She sat on the edge of the bed and unhurriedly sifted through the things her husband had treasured ever since she had known him. Old novels, dictionaries and magazines, from editions of *Readers Digests*, *Home & Garden*, *Newsweek* and *Time* to mining bulletins and geological maps of Zimbabwe were in a jumble of loose printed papers. Two glossy Italian tourist guides were among the items. She went through the items, one by one. She came across a leather-bound diary eight years old, perusal material.

The name on the diary was Akar Muja. Most of its pages were blank. Its scattered entries, hardly decipherable, were a disappointment. The entries were in Akar's hand but they were in a coded calligraphy. Scientific, mathematical and religious symbols amid small drawings between words completely impeded her understanding. One thing was certain; the man had something to hide and had to have a good reason for it.

She put the diary on the bed and looked at the maps. Finding nothing interesting in them, she continued sifting. Then she came across a bunch of rolled architectural plans and blueprints. Some were titled *The Louvre*, others *The Musée du Louvre*. The translucent papers showed the floor plan of a complex building with interconnected rooms. In a wide courtyard with the drawing of a pyramid on its centre, Akar had written *entrance* with a blue pen and scribbled the words *blend well*. The maps seemed to be saying something to her. For the sake of revisiting them, she spread the maps on the bed and resumed sifting until she came across a small spiral-bound notepad. The Eiffel Tower decorated its cover. All its pages were blank except one in the middle where her husband's hand had written:

Louvre

Admission 9.50 Euros.

Open every day except:

Tues

1st Jan

1st May

11 Nov

Christmas.

Hrs 9 am to 6 pm

Until 9:45 pm on Wed & Fri

Matipa was perplexed. Surely, there was something furtive about her husband. Akar was neither an architect nor a builder. Manifestly, he had a peculiar interest in a place or building called *The Louvre*. Paris appeared to have fascinated him, an aspect of his she hadn't known. When the storm cooled, if ever it would abate, she would be glad to hear about his architectural side and love of France.

She also put the notepad on the bed among the maps and blueprints, the written page open. Forty minutes later, she had scrutinised everything and returned the remainder of the items in the sack. Something clicked in her mind. She recalled that as they dined in the cafe in Chegutu on the day he first met her seven years ago, he had told her about the Louvre, Leonardo da Vinci and an expensive painting called the *Mona Lisa*. However, she couldn't understand why he kept maps of the museum. Peza told her some people thought Akar was a weirdo. She agreed with them.

The second sack had nothing interesting except three printed e-mails between one *ML Enthusiast* and *Big Brother*. The first correspondence was about five months old. The email addresses were quizzical letters and figures. The correspondents invariably

stated the subject as “*Ditto*”. She arranged the printouts in chronological order, and started by reading the main body of the oldest one dated 03 July:

Dear Big Brother

Thank you for your revert following my proposal to deliver the ML to your doorstep at \$15m. I’m happy to learn you now take me seriously and believe in my commitment to this project.

I guarantee you I’ll present the ML to you in the Big Apple before 31 December.

Regards

ML Enthusiast

The response dated 5 July read:

Hi ML Enthusiast

Though I’m still sceptical because many professionals have tried and failed to snatch the subject (henceforth, let’s refer to it as the subject), I’ll bank on your word.

Once the subject is safely in your possession and outside the host country, kindly advise on the possible date you’ll land this side. Real names and identity particulars won’t be important throughout the project.

Please keep me updated on developments.

Ciao,

Big Brother

The third printout dated 15 November read:

Dear Big Brother

I'm happy to inform you the project is on schedule. In a few weeks, I'll advise you on the exact delivery date of the subject in NYC. When I do, I trust we'll conduct the transaction on a Sunday in a packed church. I'll give you the time and the church's name.

On my part, I'll make sure you don't trick me. If I smell any tricks, I won't hesitate to show you my capabilities.

Good day

ML Enthusiast.

The e-mails exacerbated one fact: Akar had something brewing behind her back.

She was placing the printouts on the bed, items she would confront her husband with, when she became conscious of a spurt of wind into the bedroom and a heightening in the pitch of the hooting owl outside. The disturbance was behind her, the direction of a window she had closed. Someone must have opened it.

She heard a footstep and turned sharply, rising; afraid an intruder had joined her. A figure stood inches from her. She yelled. It was her husband, she discovered as she stepped back instinctively, her hands going up to protect her head. The expression on Akar Muja's face was intimidating. They stared at each other, Matipa recovering from shock.

"You startled me. How did you get in?"

"Keep your voice low." He pointed at the window. It was wide open and the curtain was flapping. "I know how to open it from outside."

“You’ve juju incisions on your forehead. What’s happening?”

“You tell me. I arrived in the morning. I saw a mass burial, police officers and paramilitary soldiers. What happened?”

“Where were you?”

“I was up your sacred hill. I spied on the mine with my binoculars.”

Rage rose in her. “I mean, where were you all along?”

“Is everything alright? You talked to the soldiers and the reporters. Where’s Peza?”

“You must sit down. There’s been a chain of tragedies.”

“Tell me what happened. I counted twelve convicts and twelve coffins.”

“That’s what I want to tell you. They blame you for everything.”

He was intrigued. “Me? How? Where’s Peza?”

“You must sit down.”

“No. Where’s my son, Matipa?” He looked at the maps, open notepad and printouts on the bed. “Why’re you going through my stuff, woman?”

He had never called her *woman* before. She shook her head, chuckled in anger and folded her arms across her bosom. “How’re you, Binga... Binga Jochoma?”

“Who’s Binga? What’s happening here?”

“How’s your wife? How’s Nomathemba? I’m sure you’re coming from Bulawayo.”

He was stunned.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your daughters?”

“What daughters?”

“Nyanyadzi and Rusitu. They died in their infancy.”

He sank on the edge of the bed and cupped his temples in his palms. Everything was true; he was Binga Jochoma. She read it on his facial expressions and reactions. She sat beside him and began to sob. He put an arm around her shoulders but she wriggled free, violently. Matipa felt like scalding him with seething oil and setting him on fire.

“Take it easy, Matipa. Where did you get this information?”

“That’s not important. Someone came looking for you.”

“Where’s Peza?” He demanded.

“A man came here looking for you.”

“That’s vague.”

“He set Remegio on fire. The man said his name was Bomani. He took Peza away.” She turned and looked at him. He was thunderstruck, oozing fear and trepidation. She had never seen him terrified. “I want my son back. And I want him alive!” His numbness infuriated her. She grabbed his collar with both hands and began shaking him vigorously. “You, whatever your real name is, I want my son back. I want him back. Do you hear me?”

He remained astounded.

“Hey, you, I’m talking to you!”

“Stop it.” Binga removed her hands forcibly from his shirt.

“I’ve never seen you so shaken. God knows I know what you are. You can confront him.”

“What am I?”

“You’re an army deserter... precisely an ex-commando. You fought in the DRC.”

He sighed and spoke to the wall. “Yes. I fought in the DRC.”

“You can confront, Bomani. Look at me.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Matipa,” he said without looking at her. “I attacked him once when he ambushed me with his men. It was a counter-attack and I was fighting for my life. A person fighting for his life has the advantage of adrenaline.”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared.”

He sighed again. “Bomani is a very dangerous man. He’s the only man who scares me senseless. When did he come?”

“29 November. Please don’t tell me you’re afraid. Find my son before it’s too late.”

He continued to address the wall. “Bomani... Bomani Kumanda is like a decorated matador. Bulls have gored and scarred his body

over the years. The experience dangerously perfected his act. A scarred matador is a guillotine to any beast.”

“But bulls have killed men in the ring.”

“Yes, Matipa, They’ve, but on rare occasions.”

“I’m not taking any excuses. I can’t afford to.”

Still he avoided looking at her. “Wherever he took the boy, Bomani is on vintage ground and has the upper hand.”

His words and tone were a painful onslaught to her senses. “It doesn’t sound like you talking. When did you become a cockroach?”

“We’ve watched matadors in the arena. Only when they’ve dug in and unfolded their red capes do they signal for the release of the bull. Ninety-nine percent of the time the poor bull charges to its death.” He was silent and pensive for a moment. “A calculating bull might outstrip or undress the matador, but other matadors present won’t let it slaughter one of their own. The beast, not the bullfighter, is meant to die in the arena.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Bomani can’t have visited this place alone. He prowls with his denizens of death... about have a dozen men. One of the men carries an AK 47 and covers them, militarily speaking.” He turned and looked at her. “Where do I find Bomani?”

Matipa was bewildered. “I thought you’d know.”

“Honestly, I don’t know where to find him. What I know is he camps in derelict graveyards and he’s a very dangerous man.”

“Please don’t keep telling me that. It won’t bring back Peza.”

“I know Peza is alive, but I can’t guarantee his wellbeing.”

She wiped her tears and urged him with her eyes to say more.

“Bomani has the patience of a hangman. He waits for everything to fall into place. Peza is bait he can’t do without.”

“What does he want from you?”

“He came to settle a score, that’s one thing. But he usually collaborates with his enemies.”

“He asked for my menstrual blood. What did he want it for?”

“He’s an evil man. Menstrual blood is dreaded from Cape Town to Jerusalem.”

“He said you must bring a black hen.”

Binga’s eyes widened. “Black hens are for rituals.”

“You must convert Akar... or Binga. I don’t know what to call you.”

“Whether I’m a Christian or pagan, Bomani’ll kill me if he decides to. He attacks priests and whores alike....”

She sealed her ears with her palms until his lips stopped moving. “I don’t want to hear that. I want my son back.” She crossed to the wardrobe and returned with the earthen bowl.

“What’s that?”

“There’s a name inside for your eyes,” she said, giving him the vessel, and resumed her position beside him.

“Who gave you the bowl?” he asked, peering inside the vessel.

“Read the name inside.” She folded her arms angrily.

His eyes widened on reading the inscription. “I don’t believe this!” he exclaimed fearfully.

“God sees everything, Akar. Now tell me. Are you coming from Nomathemba or the student?”

“What’re you supposed to do with this bowl? This is witchcraft, Matipa. Do you realise someone could become insane or die?”

“When I learnt of your infidelity, I refused to accept you’d eyes for other women. I refused to believe you fancied students and that one was milking you dry as your son was being kidnapped.” She began to sob afresh. “I thought you loved me. I thought you were different from other men.”

He couldn’t look at her. “Peza, not Nomathemba or Gillian, is our worry at the moment.”

“The names I called you by all these years aren’t Zimbabwean. I was suspicious.”

“*Akar* is Egyptian.”

“You gave yourself an Egyptian name?”

“It means victorious, viper or killer. *Muja* is probably Islamic. I don’t know what it means.” He rose, pulled the curtain aside and flung the vessel outside through the window.

Matipa didn’t hear the sound of its landing.

Chapter 21

South African Airways Boeing 747, flight 1971 from Johannesburg, broke from a clouded sky and touched down at the Harare International Airport at exactly 7:00 am on 11 December. With a deafening hum, the aeroplane taxied to the movable disembarking ramp connected to the terminal.

Weary and sleepy passengers deplaned into the terminal. Senator Lisa Gororo was among them. She walked majestically, her head held high, her chin as parallel to the ground as possible. In tailored conservative couture, from a distance, she appeared like an executive in her mid-thirties.

She was returning from London via Johannesburg, because British Airways cancelled all direct flights to Harare a couple of years ago. The carrier gave lame, window-dressing excuses for the cancellation. The Senator knew the reasons were political and designed to stifle the flood of British tourists to Zimbabwe. She was proud and happy to be back in her motherland, the perpetual home of the Victoria Falls, Lake Kariba and the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, even if few European tourist set foot there, and negative publicity mongers continued to liken the country to the historic ruins in Masvingo Province. Britain and her Lords and Knights, the board members of British Airways and every country that had imposed and vouched for illegal economic sanctions against Zimbabwe had the liberty to go and hang.

At sixty-two years old, much of the Senator's wavy hair, dyed and re-dyed innumerable times, had thinned. A well-combed bushy wig concealed the disaster. Paradoxically, wigs and hairy weaves, the residue of either dead people or losers abroad, were anathema to her. However, the need for a modern and younger outlook outweighed all her other considerations. When one looked closely at her, one saw that she had also mistakenly dyed her earlobes and the periphery of

her face. Unkind members of the Opposition described Party women with such cosmetic anomalies as amateur clowns.

Deep wrinkles defaced the Senator. Her family genetics were the culprit; her parents and siblings aged faster on the outside. Her nostalgia for a youthful image had seen her waste a lot of money on expensive cosmetic kits that claimed to reverse the effects of ageing. The gym helped her remarkably. The only problem was she couldn't go to the gym regularly; her schedules wouldn't allow it. The Senator had long lost faith in numbers when it came to age. Numbers were only significant at election time.

Her calves taut below the skirt of an executive matching custom, she strained to walk with the athleticism of youth, her nostalgia thereof a permanent bother in her mind.

Once upon a time in her life, she was full of the pulchritude of youth and turned heads at school and in the streets. Now the skin under her chin sagged repulsively. Her body was now a disservice to the Senator schooled in believing a woman of substance was her looks first, followed by her intelligence. Her mother, from a very tender age, engrained it in her that a pretty woman got whatever she desired and, if professional qualifications compounded the beauty, she could sway the world. As she loitered in the terminal, no one could tell the fullness and sharpness of her breasts and fundament was artificial. She owed her figure to corsets, stuffing and money. Her clothes, jewellery and perfume were expensive.

Almost at par with black economic empowerment and the indigenisation of all sectors of the economy, Senator Lisa Gororo believed in everlasting youthfulness, joy and romance at any cost. What could a person devoid of romance achieve? Even demonic Adolf Hitler had an avowed girlfriend. Most of the world's dictators had youthful spouses and countless tender mistresses. Rich women abroad were having their faces surgically lifted, their tummies cut and cast in incinerators.

She was pleased her London trip was successful and hopeful that it would literally bear fruits. The sole purpose of her two-day visit was to consult an acclaimed gynaecologist in Britain, a professor at the London University School of Medicine and Neonatal Science. The specialist, a frail old man whose fatigued eyes had definitely peered into the private parts of thousands of women throughout the years, examined her thoroughly and drew samples from her body. At the end of the analyses, he assured her she still had chances to conceive though she was menopausal, and prescribed her a combination of expensive fertility drugs. After failing to find them in many pharmacies and nearly panicking, she finally bought them from a chemist near Harrods. The professor said the combination had a success rate of over ninety percent. He was quick to point to her that some of his clients who were over sixty years old conceived after taking them.

Senator Lisa Gororo was childless. According to the specialist's prescription, she had taken the first pills the day before in London. She looked forward to the act; the drugs on their own wouldn't fertilize her eggs. A man had to do the job. She wasn't scouting for that man. He was already in her life, and, twenty-nine years old, special. His physique and intelligence were perfect. It annoyed her that people called him her toy-boy behind her back. If his parents could afford and had sent him to university, she was sure he could've become an engineer or some company manager, which would've put him in a league beyond her reach. There just was no way the two of them would've met.

As she waited for her luggage to go through the scanner and appear on the conveyor belt, she lit a cigarette and switched on her mobile phone. Eagerly, like a love-excitable teenager, she dialled her man's number. A programmed apologetic female voice told her the number wasn't reachable.

Her luggage appeared on the conveyor. An airport attendant loaded it onto a trolley and she carted it towards the exit. Beyond the

exit doors was a crowd of expectant people waiting to receive friends, relatives and business associates. Her personal chauffeur in a dark suit and glass was among the people. Greeting her verbally coupled with a slight bow, he took over the carting of the trolley. The Senator walked behind her; for the sake of authority and control, she found it unprofessional to be conversational with any of her workers. Besides, she wasn't fond of the chauffeur.

Often, she had caught the bachelor of fifty-three staring and admiring her discreetly. She couldn't entertain the thought she could be his secret lover. In her eyes, he was an old spent cartridge. Discounting his amorous stares, the chauffeur was a smart and presentable man who visited a barber weekly and only went outdoors on condition his shoes were polished and shining and his neck-tie was in the right position. Some people, especially parliamentary members of the Opposition, surmised he was her live-in boyfriend complimenting the efforts of her toy-boy.

The airport's main exit doors swung open automatically from their advent. The two exited and walked across a pedestrian crossing into a carport where a black ML 350 Mercedes Benz awaited them. The chauffeur opened the rear door on the driver's side. As a precaution, she always sat behind the chauffeur in case he woke up homicidal. By a boom at the carport exit, the chauffeur paid two dollars for the parking. They drove out of the airport.

"Where should I take you, madam?"

"The city centre. I want to shop a little then proceed to the farm. I failed to reach Jasper. You think he's at Van Praaah?"

"I don't think he's back yet. He received a distress call from Ngezi Game Reserve three days ago. There was an emergency."

"What was the story?"

"Crocodiles escaped from a private rehabilitation pool on the edge of the reserve. The man who called said the crocodiles were near Turf Township, Zimplats Mine's residential suburb. Authorities feared human life was endangered."

“Did they come to pick him?”

“It was an emergency, madam. He drove out in the topless Land Rover.”

“Did he take Toshla with him?”

He nodded. “He said he wanted to do a quick job and return either today or tomorrow.”

Thereafter, they drove in silence along Airport Road towards the city centre. The Senator thought and worried about her boyfriend. She was against Jasper’s profession as a game ranger and renowned specialist in the subduing, capture or putting to sleep of crocodiles. The young man was daring and dived with death in his line of duty. Jasper’s profession embarrassed her.

As someone who could talk to two of the most powerful people in the country at any time, the Chairman of the Party and the President and Commander-in-chief of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, she wasn’t the archetypal African woman, a baby-making peon that bowed to man. The cellular numbers of brigadiers and generals were on her fingertips. The top echelons of the Party were a close fraternity.

From all angles but marital, she exuded power and authority. Men bowed to her. As a highly esteemed Senator of the Party and National Publicity Officer for the Women’s League, she couldn’t genuinely hold her head high among her peers and announce that Jasper, the love of her life, killed or wrestled with crocodiles. Such work was undignified and for hopeless uneducated people. Often, it was ungainly and he came home bruised and limping. She tried to tell him he wasn’t made of steel, but he would not listen. Neither did he understand she wasn’t like a louse hidden in a cloak of sociability, but was a respected person with the visibility of a lighthouse. He argued childishly he was a macho man and liked the feel of adrenaline rising in his body.

As it was, she wanted Jasper to marry her twofold, under customary law and before a magistrate. After that, when she was sure

beyond doubt he was hers until death, she would do anything humanly to get him a post. The Senator hoped he would grow out of his perilous tastes, after which she could exploit her senatorial influence to land him a senior government post in the Department of Wild Life. He would continue to enjoy game, but without getting himself dirty and bruised.

Lately, the Department of Wild Life had advertised the post of Director of National Parks and Monuments. The Parks and Wild Life board was looking for a person with proven skills in strategic planning and management. The person had to be highly organised, self-motivated, results-driven and committed to continuous improvement in the provision of quality service by the Authority. A degree in Natural Sciences from a reputable university, strong leadership qualities and acumen for business were prerequisites.

It entailed the incumbent had to be profoundly skilled in developing and maintaining effective relationships with stakeholders such as the Government of Zimbabwe, offshore business partners, international and local non-governmental organisations such as CITES, WWF and IUCN. The professional requirements for the post were stringent. The incumbent would manage and oversee the three divisions of the Parks Estate, which were the Conservative, Commercial and the Administrative.

Her boyfriend didn't meet any of the requirements save that he was an indigenous Zimbabwean. He wasn't like her former husband, the late Timothy Chimedza, an ex-political detainee, liberation war veteran, university lecturer and Member of Parliament. Her husband was good in every aspect except that he was diabetic. However, it wasn't an imbalance in sugar levels that claimed his life five years ago, but a special spell, *rukawo*.

Though Timothy had been an MP and an ad hoc member of the Politburo, and had benefited from Zimbabwe's Agrarian Reform and became a wealthy man wielding knowledge and great political muscle, for Lisa, his manhood had always been the focal point of their

marriage. Her father owned a fleet of haulage trucks that ferried goods from as far as Kinshasa in the DRC to Cape Town in South Africa. He also ran regional luxurious couches that ranked at major hotels.

Because the Senator was no stranger to a life of abundance, wealth couldn't move or flatter her. Her father was old and of the belief that money bought anything. Lately the old man had taken to globetrotting in search of neurological specialists to prop up his failing health. The Senator was one of two children born to her parents. Her mother succumbed to chronic high-blood pressure about a decade ago. Upon *something* happening to her father, she was certain to get fifty percent of the inheritance. Senator Lisa Gororo had married Timothy for his manhood.

She had been a good wife to him, faithful through and through, and submissive when he needed her, but he couldn't make her conceive, eluding and dashing her expectations of motherhood. The first three years of their marriage were climacteric tugs full of vying, thrust and parry. Over the years, the fire gradually died and ushered them into an almost celibate companionship. He said the culprit was mellitus diabetes.

The Senator remembered her husband with an admixture of melancholy and embarrassment. He died naked and indecently "glued" to the wife of a farmer whose property was adjacent to Van Praaah Farm in the Brompton commercial farming area on the eastern edge of Claw Dam. Many people, most of them general farm workers and hands, gathered outside the farmhouse when he couldn't extricate himself from the neighbour's wife one afternoon. His cries of agony travelled far over rolling farmland. Fortunately, she was in Harare attending the business of her office at Parliament Building when her husband indulged.

The wife's husband, a fellow liberation war veteran, was shopping in Johannesburg. When the police contacted him and informed him of the development at his farm, the police alleged he refuted the story

arguing vehemently his wife was such a remarkable Christian and person of good moral standing that there just had to be some mistake in the identity of the woman. He then switched off his mobile phone. An ambulance ferried the lovebirds to Kadoma General Hospital. Intrigued doctors at the hospital tried in vain every trick, and referred the adulterous couple to Parerenyatwa Hospital in Harare.

To ascertain it was her husband, Senator Lisa Gororo caught up with the two in a ward in the city hospital. Indeed, Timothy Hondo Chimedza Gororo, dump and agonised, was “intimate” with the neighbour’s wife. A grey, deathly hue was already upon him. After verifying, hospital staff asked her to leave and return the following morning during normal visiting hours. She resolved not to visit him or ever see him if ever he walked out of the hospital alive.

Doctors failed to separate them and her husband and the woman died after two days. She was relieved when he died. His relatives took his body to a remote rural area for burial. She refused to accompany the body. The adulterers’ story together with their full names was in the newspapers and on national television.

Senator Lisa Gororo first considered suicide, and then she wished she could find a deep burrow and vanish forever. Depression led her to a psychological doctor. The doctor began by saying: “According to Dr Satoshi Kanazawa, an evolutionary psychologist, men cheat because males of all mammalian species were evolutionarily designed to seek sexual variety, and have the psychological and physiological mechanisms to be sexually invigorated at the sight of new females with whom they haven’t copulated with.” The Senator stormed out of his consultation room.

After a few months, she learnt to take everything in her stride: indulgence killed Timothy, she was alive and the future was before her. From his adultery and death, she drew the lesson it was risky to love wholeheartedly a man one couldn’t control. Timothy became adulterous because he didn’t love her. He didn’t love her because for twenty-two years she had failed to bear him a child.

For four years after her husband's death, she led the life of a celibate until one afternoon when a marauding crocodile from Claw Dam, Kadoma's main water reservoir, invaded her farmhouse after a team of local men chased it. She didn't want the men in her house and called Brompton Police Post. The police informed the Department of Wildlife, which contacted a specialist, Jasper Jagadzamakarwe.

He arrived with his companion, Toshla, in a ranger's Land Rover towards sunset. Besides the dog, he had a length of thick rope. The dog jumped into the house through a window while he opened the main door and entered. Within twenty minutes, he had clamped the reptile's mouth with the rope and was dragging it out, the dog barking behind the crocodile. As the local men helped him pull it out of the house, the Senator's eyes were on the wonder boy and his rippling muscles. She wished she were twenty-one. Reconsidering, she knew she had never believed in huddles. She recalled elements of her first conversation with him:

"You can do with some refreshments," she offered casually and watched his face brighten a little. "I'm Senator Gororo."

"I've seen you on television, madam. Everyone knows you. My name is Jasper."

"Come inside the house. My maid will feed your dog."

"He attacks strangers who try to feed him."

To Jasper's great dismay, the local men speared the crocodile as she led him into the lounge. He had preferred to either hand-over the reptile to senior game wardens or return it to its habitat. As it was, no one had instructed him to kill the animal. The men claimed it had killed many children.

The lounge was a mess. The reptile had knocked and overturned furniture. The two of them moved items into position and gave the room some form of order before settling on opposite sofas. She had already stocked the fireplace with wood, charcoal and dry grass.

Before the fireplace was an expensive Persian rug with elaborate embroidery.

When she sat with the young man in the lounge, sipping vodka, large portraits of her late husband looking down at them, she asked him personal questions. Among the portraits was a larger-than-life gilded photograph of the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Republic. His Excellency looked down at them.

The furniture was ornate, largely polished teak and mahogany. The decor was both regal and fascistic, chaises and brocade couches on Persian rugs with gold-threaded poufs. Most of her furniture and decor was from Tehran, souvenirs of her numerous visits to that country at the behest of the President to compliment the cultural efforts of the Zimbabwean Embassy in Iran. In fact, almost everything in the house was a memento of some business-cum-political trip to either, Tehran, Beijing or Bangkok.

“Where’s your rural home?” she asked him.

“I’m a single simpleton from an insignificant rural area called Mungorwenyi Village in mountainous Nyanga. I barely passed Ordinary Level. Tracking, catching and killing dangerous crocodiles catalogued my life after school.”

She took it he thought she was considering offering him a job and was genuinely interested in his curriculum vitae. Though he wasn’t much of a talker, he was young, excitable and manageable. She could manipulate him into falling in love with her, and as long as he was financially dependent on her, she could queen over him and revamp his life in the process. He was her break from a self-induced celibacy.

Jasper kept staring at the portraits until she rose, lit the grass in the fireplace and began taking down the pictures compromising the atmosphere of her intention. The fire burned with a crackling noise.

“Senator, why’re you removing the pictures?”

“Because he died four years ago and I think I’ve found his replacement.” She suddenly stopped. A portrait of herself and her

husband was in her hands. "Jasper, in your opinion, what do you think a crocodile needs?"

"Oh, are you mourning the dead crocodile, Senator?"

"No. It's dead and forgotten." She looked at him pensively. "I seek to know your level of maturity. Tell me."

"Well, Madam Senator. I think a crocodile needs a lot of fresh water with a lot of aquatic life. Most assuredly, it won't need human beings near its habitat unless they're part of its diet."

She shook her head. "That was a snap answer. You aren't at gunpoint. Think again, Jasper. Give yourself time."

He thought for a while. "A crocodile needs a friendly home, a lot of sunshine and horse meat twice a day. Is that correct, Senator?"

"You can shelve the formalities and respect. Call me Lisa."

He was about to take a sip and stopped, the glass posed near his lips. "I beg your pardon, Senator?"

"You heard me. Call me Lisa. It takes a bit of getting used to." He wanted to decline but she reverted to her quizzical question. "A crocodile doesn't need all that. It needs a fellow crocodile of the opposite sex. That's all it needs and can travel kilometres for a partner. It can wait for years in the hope that a partner will come along. Usually the hope is in vain. At times, it pays off. What do you think?"

He laughed. "I don't know what to think." He looked at his wristwatch. "After this glass I must take my leave, Senator—"

"Call me *Lisa* or I'll rent my clothes and scream." Her face was suddenly grave. "The men who killed the crocodile outside will come to my aid and perform a citizens' arrest." She watched with amusement as shock registered on his face. "On one hand, they will beat you like a piñata before they hand you over to the police. Any sane magistrate or judge will believe the word of a Senator. On the other hand, if you're not so lucky, depending on how I'll be crying and cursing you, they'll beat you into stains and blotches of blood."

He rose slowly. "What're you driving at, Senator?"

She set the portrait on a sofa and crossed to him. "I'm talking about two crocodiles of the opposite sex enjoying gin and tonic in a farmhouse."

"We're now in the heart of the city, madam." It was the chauffer's voice. It jerked the Senator from her reverie. "Where would you want to do your shopping?"

"Eastgate Mall."

Chapter 22

By 9 am on 11 December, Jasper was speeding on the seventy-seven kilometre-stretch of smooth curves and even tarmac between Zimplats Platinum Mine and the carriageway farming settlement of Selous. He was hopeful his fiancée would return that day and wanted the Senator to find him waiting for her at the farmhouse.

His business on the eastern edge of Turf Township and the border of Ngezi Game Reserve done, the mine had paid him handsomely for putting its staff members and their families out of danger. Assigned game wardens showed him the bushes and other intricate areas where each of the eight crocodiles had strayed. With Toshla distracting the reptiles, he gagged them with his rope to the amusement of fearful onlookers watching from a safe distance. Wardens and a group of volunteers, largely drunken men and jobseekers in abundance in the township, pulled the crocodiles into a mine dumper, which transported the animals individually to a farm less than two kilometres away.

Now he was richer than he came. One thousand five hundred US dollars was a lot of money for a job that took him less than four hours yesterday afternoon. The payment was unusual. On other assignments, he had worked for mostly praise as a community duty. He supposed those who engaged him thought the thrill of catching the crocodiles was his reward.

Except the occasional spectacular and droning three-trailer trucks, each hauling ninety tonnes of platinum ore to the smelter in Selous, which he came across and overtook, the state-of the-art highway barely had other traffic. The dog sat in the back, its mane flying in the wind. Jasper's matching green sleeveless vest and cargo pants were soiled, evidence of a hands-on man returning home.

His arms were a marvel to him and the public. More noticeable on them was the one word tattoo: LISA. On each arm, from the wrist to the elbow joint, the name stood out in calligraphic bold letters. On his deltoids were the initials LG, standing for Lisa Gororo. A casual observer could tag him a professional bodybuilder with a slight insanity for tattoos. His rippling muscles came from a strict regimen of empty-handed physical exercises, weightlifting, shadow sparring, running, and hanging upside-down for ages on cross bars and tree branches like a roosting bat, and of course, the obligatory tags of war with crocodiles.

While his muscles were the leitmotif of young townsmen, the truth was that his primary muscles came from toiling in Triangle and Hippo Valley sugar plantations where he found employment after secondary school. For three years, he worked as a cane cutter paid per acreage.

It was backbreaking work pleasantly interrupted by his sporting activities at the prestigious Triangle Sports Club, an elite but amateur decathlete club, where the plantation manager enrolled him because of his stamina. He went on to become outstanding in sharpshooting, archery, canoeing and cycling. Because he could hold the machete in either hand, allowing the blisters on the other relief from pressure, he developed his arms equally from oaring and sugarcane cutting. On the thick-veined arms, someone went on to engrave a permanent romantic reminder in the form of tattoos, which he saw as mini-billboards on his person reminding him of his live-in fiancée: Senator Lisa Gororo.

Whenever he thought of her, he re-lived their first intimacy on a rug by the fireplace in her lounge, when she threatened and *raped* him. Surprisingly, at sixty-one years old, panting with exhilaration, she had resigned herself to him and mused her years of loneliness and erotic depravity, and he feared her excitement coupled with the sudden rush of blood in her veins could trigger a heart attack in her. Nevertheless, he couldn't withdraw from her because she clung to him leechlike.

When the fire in him was next to searing, she moaned aloud in ecstasy, like one in an opium delirium: “Money, power and respect I’ve earned and commanded, but none of these catapulted me to this heaven of heavens.” He took it the gin in her was bluffing.

He spent the night in the master bedroom of the farmhouse. During the night, she was awful. She told him she was a member of a special parliamentary committee tasked to probe irregularities in the mining sector. She said the committee investigated operations at Chiadzwa diamond fields and probed mining firms whose directors were widely believed to be fraudulent and scandalous. She told him what he already knew but thought was privileged information: that the Minister of Mines told the committee in camera he had done his research and found out players in the diamond industry globally were drug traffickers, smugglers or plain crooks. He said the minister was of the belief the committee was fooling itself by thinking the Government of Zimbabwe could find cleaner investors to collaborate with in Marange. Jasper fell asleep.

When he woke around 2 am, Senator Lisa Gororo was still drinking and talking, babbling about her participation in the Liberation Struggle to oust the minority government of Ian Douglas Smith, disclosing that she was mainly a woman of comfort, just like many women who took part in the war that ended in 1979.

She said after the war, she received a gratuity of fifty thousand Zimbabwean dollars from the War Veteran Compensatory Fund and a further hundred thousand dollars after falsely claiming compensation for ninety-nine percent disability because of the war. She said like her, many so-called war veterans had benefitted unwarrantedly from the fund. Then she vented vitriol against Britain and her allies for imposing economic sanctions on Zimbabwe, and expressed her fear the former coloniser could turn the masses of Zimbabwe against the remnant of members of the semi-ousted Party, and kill them.

Jasper begged her to sleep. She was about to lie beside him when she discovered the name *Alma* tattooed on his inner upper arm. The tattoo was the size of the smallest finger and had bloated with age. She demanded to know whose name it was. He told her it was his first intimate date whose cherry he stole when he was in Form 1, which incensed her into biting the tattoo in a brutal bid to rip off the chunk of the skin. Jasper recoiled violently. She apologised and coaxed him into imbibing vodka until he fell asleep in a drunken stupor. When he woke up at sunrise, his body hurt in many places. No one was in the bedroom. From one of the bathrooms down a passage came the sound of running water. Someone had tattooed the name LISA and the initials LG on his arms, deltoids, thighs and abdomen. When he looked at the image of his back in the mirror, the words LISA FOR LIFE tattooed diagonally across his back confronted him.

The water stopped running. He heard the sound of approaching footsteps and expected to see the Senator. Instead, a silver-haired white man, by smell and appearance vagrant, walked into the room without knocking and stared in open admiration at Jasper. The man carried a worn-out leather bag with blotches of dry Indian ink. Perturbed and embarrassed, Jasper frantically grabbed a large towel and wrapped it around his waist. The man kept admiring him, until he learnt the seeming vagrant wasn't gloating over his figure but the tattoos, which were his handiwork.

The Senator entered in a morning gown. "Good work, Vegas," she said, halting beside the man and appraising Jasper. "Your payment is on the mantle in the lounge. Breathe a word to anyone and that's the end of your life."

The man shook his head and smiled; an assurance he was discreet.

"I trust you, Vegas. Go load yourself with booze."

The man left.

“I believe in things that last, Jasper. One-night stands are whorish and undignified. You’ll get rid of your low-class limitations and marry me. If you entertain other thoughts and choose to be my enemy, I’ll make sure you automatically become an enemy of the State. Such people don’t last in this country.”

“But I’m only twenty-eight.”

“I’m sixty-one. Ask any First World celebrity, in the twenty-first century anything goes.”

Driving along the private road from Zimplats Platinum Mine, Jasper thought it was wise to obliterate their initial conversations and the memory of the Senator’s shameless compulsions. Over the last two years, it cost him effort to disregard the politician’s wrinkles and age and love her. Senator Lisa Gororo believed anyone could turn the hands of time in one’s head. She said her late husband squandered her life.

As he saw more of her, a beautiful, kissable woman full of ardour came out of the old husk that was the Senator. His only worry was that they had found each other when she was past her mendicancy, or almost passing it. When he voiced his worry, she laughed and told him she would bear him a child because money bought anything. She gave him numerous examples of older women, peasant for that matter, who gave birth at an advanced age.

Jasper had travelled about half of the length of the stretch when his mobile phone beeped, an indication he had entered a mobile network-service zone. The phone alerted him he missed Lisa’s call some two hours earlier, which meant she had landed and was probably on her way to Van Praaah Farm. He was about to dial her number when the cell phone rang. Of all people, his sister was calling. What did she want when the family and she openly ostracised him for co-habiting with a woman more than twice his age? He last spoke to her and his family some two years ago.

“Hello, sister,” he answered. “What’s up?”

Matipa's voice was mournful and begging: "Please leave whatever you're doing and come to Sakis Mine immediately."

"What's wrong? Are you speaking on behalf of the family?"

"Someone kidnapped Peza two weeks ago."

"Jesus. Who kidnapped him? Where's your husband?"

"Binga is shaking. I can't tell you everything on the phone."

"I'm on my way. I'll be there in an hour."

He was obliged to assist in the hope her sister could speak to the family favourably about him for a reunion. For two years, he had felt like a family dissident. Wary the Senator was likely to try his number and order him to meet her at the farm; he switched off the cellular phone and accelerated the Land Rover.

Chapter 23

Remegio's body lay unclaimed in a mortuary. In the compound twelve people including an entire family of the Tembos, except for one escapee, were dead. Gogo Belemina and *Madzibaba* Tinashe were dead. Bomani Kumanda kidnapped Peza, all because of him.

Binga Jochoma couldn't comprehend it as he sat on the edge of the bed, the dismissal letter in his hand. How had he wronged the gods and the spirits to invite a disaster like Bomani Kumanda into his life? On 31 December, when an alleged prophecy was given that a demon would come looking for him, it never occurred to him the prophet meant Bomani. Binga tried hard to find an amicable solution besides fleeing the mine with his wife. None came to his mind. Confronting Bomani was suicidal. The man had sent many people to premature graves. Binga wasn't foolish enough to walk into the open jaws of a proven monster.

For the umpteenth time, he read the first line of the dismissal letter:

This letter serves to inform you that the management has dismissed you with immediate effect from the employ of Sakis Mine...

Just then he heard approaching footsteps and stopped reading. He suspected the advent of one of two people, a leading member of the paramilitary police or Bomani. The army details could've been observing the compound from vantage points around the mine. Binga had taken precaution by remaining indoors and never venturing out. When the need arose, he endured the indecency of relieving himself in a bucket, which his grumbling wife took to a communal toilet and emptied. Perhaps the soldiers had figured from the bucket Matipa carried to the toilet that he was home. If it wasn't a soldier then it had

to be Bomani. The brute had said he would return. The mean killer was a man who kept his word.

Binga dashed into the lounge-cum-kitchen and peered outside through cracks in the door in time to see Matipa stepping onto the threshold. She was coming from the offices where she had gone to call her brother. He thought she would take long at the offices. Binga had failed to find enough words to stress it to Matipa her brother's intervention would be unintentionally sacrificial. He couldn't envisage how a crocodile catcher and killer could overpower a mystic man of juju. If ever Jasper came and he happened to confront the killer, Bomani would kill his brother-in-law, no doubt.

He unlatched the door as she turned its handle. She entered and stared at him.

"You're scared stiff," she said scornfully.

"We must leave this place while we still can."

"I told you I won't leave without my son. If you now think he's dead, let's perform a symbolic burial. I can't bear perpetual mourning."

"A symbolic grave won't bring him back to life if he's dead."

"Are you now of the opinion that Bomani killed him?"

"No, Matipa. I'm saying we must run."

"Then run. What's stopping you?"

"I can't leave you behind. I'm trying to avoid a double tragedy." He fished a wad of money in fifty-dollar banknotes from his pocket. "That's four hundred and fifty dollars. This money can put distance between our enemy and us. It can put a roof over our heads for two or three months in any high-density area."

She dipped a hand into the cup of her brassiere and drew a hundred dollar banknote and three twenty-dollar bills, which she held in his face. "I still have some of the money you gave Ivy to pass on to me. If I wanted to run, I could've done so on my own. If I must run, I'll run in my own direction because I don't know you. You've hidden many things from me. I've suffered for your sake."

“In the right season you shall know the truth, Matipa.”

“Who’re you? Tell me about Nomathemba and your daughters. Tell me about Gillian.”

“That’s not pertinent. We must run.”

She looked at the money in his hand. “How do you make your money, if I may ask?”

He shook his head.

“Tell me. At least it gives us a starting point.”

He couldn’t tell her about the muggings and the robberies in underground tunnels. It would be absurd to tell her how he had made the four hundred and fifty dollars in his hand. How could he tell her he had made enough money to fly abroad for the heist of his life, but had suddenly decided to visit his girlfriend in Seke of Chitungwiza? Was it possible to be honest enough and disclose he had been overzealous to the extent of losing over five thousand dollars in the burial of a non-relative and feeding Catholic strangers at a funeral gathering?

How could he tell her he had used a rental car to drive to the cemetery where the dead man was buried in an expensive casket he paid for? How could he inform her he had picked two would-be travellers at the last roundabout along Beatrice Road and driven them to the man’s grave the previous night where he forced them to exhume the casket and the body? Could he let her know he had to axe one of the two men for them to know he was murderous?

There was no way he was going to reveal he had forced two men to de-stuff a body from a casket, cast it back into its grave and cover it with soil again. That he had dumped the men in a bushy area about ten kilometres from the Harare-Beatrice highway, driven back to the city and sold the casket to a mortuary attendant at a bargain price of five hundred dollars. That the attendant complained about the dirt on the casket and argued it would cost him to have it cleaned before he could re-sell it to unsuspecting mourners. The man wanted to buy it for three hundred dollars. Binga had to beg him to agree to the price

of five hundred dollars. Still the price Binga pleaded was painful because the coffin cost him nearly a thousand and four hundred dollars including tax. Of the amount he received from the attendant, Binga spent fifty dollars on new clothes, food and transport to the mine.

“I’ve never mattered to you, that’s the reason you can’t tell me.”

“You’re the luckiest woman on earth,” he barked. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“We’ve never been husband and wife. I was your mistress, God forbid, because you’re a married man.” She started to sob and brushed past him on her way to the bedroom.

He stood transfixed, thinking in circles, Matipa’s snivels agonising him. He followed her into the bedroom and found her sitting on the edge of the bed. Sitting beside her, he spoke to the wall mechanically as he did the previous night. “If you got through to Jasper and he’s coming, I sincerely wish the two of you good luck. I’m leaving this place tonight. I’m leaving it with or without you. The choice is yours. I won’t return to this mine.”

She looked at him astonished. “What about Peza?”

“Children are a gift from God. God’s bag of such gifts is never empty.”

“You can’t turn your back on your son.”

“The circumstances dictate it. It’s a sacrifice.”

“You’re as evil as Bomani. May evil dog you the rest of your life.”

“I wish you well, Matipa. Let me say, I’m not the Devil; therefore I wish you well, Matipa. The Devil is the man who came looking for me. You’re damn lucky you didn’t see his nakedness. When Bomani is extremely angry or wants something to happen, he takes off all his clothes and covers himself in ashes. At the Chiadzwa diamond fields when chaos was reigning supreme, he killed illegal diggers, police officers and their horses alike.”

“You’re whitewashing your cowardice, that’s all.”

“Today, 11 December, the sun goes down to our happy marriage of seven years. If Bomani didn’t come it would’ve remained happy.”

“I rue the day we met. God was out of His mind when I met you.”

“I’m a sinner. You deserve a better man. If Bomani didn’t come looking for me you could’ve been safely practising your apostolic faith. The shrine is abandoned.” He sighed. “I hope you won’t find a law-abiding husband, honest and straightforward to the extent of seeing you and your children starving.”

“I’ll be better off with a loafer with nothing to his name. I need an honest and considerate husband. God’ll lead him to me.”

“I’ve ventured underground and done wicked things in the name of love and provision for my family. I’ve slept in the open innumerable times so that you and Peza would never lack anything.” He turned and looked at her. “Thank you for your gratitude, Matipa.”

She sobbed more, her shoulders shuddering. For several minutes, they sat like total strangers sharing a bus stop bench. He was indifferent to her sobs.

“I don’t want you to leave me,” she said between sobs.

“No, Matipa. I’m a bad man. I disrupted your life.”

“I can’t start life afresh now. Just tell me who you are. Are you Binga Jochoma?”

He nodded and she stopped crying, stupefied by the admission.

“Tell me about Nomathemba, Nyanyadzi and Rusitu.”

“I love you, Matipa, that’s why I’m a bad man.”

She urged him with her stare to disclose more.

He started by telling her he fought in the DRC when rebels invaded that country. “I fought bravely and fearlessly,” he said. “Instead of the army awarding me a medal for bravery or a DSC, it sends its brutes to track me.”

“What’s a DSC?”

“A Distinguished Service Cross.”

“Go on.”

He told her he deserted the army at the end of the war upon his return to Zimbabwe because the remuneration was deplorable and he was tired of being an expendable State asset. However, beginning with the army was a wrong start. He told her he was from Chikukwa Village in Chimanimani, where he grew up and schooled. Then he became an ordinary soldier before he trained as a commando at Wafa-Wafa Training Camp near Lake Kariba. His tour of duty in the DRC was under the Commando Regiment. After the war, he assumed five false identities to frustrate paramilitary police officers and the State machinery looking for him.

“Is it true you’re legally married to Nomathemba?”

He coughed and scratched his chin in an attempt to elude the question. Just then, both of them heard the noise of commotion outside. Baffled compound dwellers called each other from their houses to watch an astonishing spectacle. Something was happening outside; whistling and fearful shouting said it.

The first thing that crossed Binga’s mind was that the five paramilitary police officers had learnt he was in the house, and were surrounding it, pistols drawn and cocked. Now a member was procedurally approaching the house to order him to present himself for his arrest. He wasn’t a ram. He wasn’t going to be sheepish as they came to arrest him, the first phase of a torturous military incarceration. He sprang to his feet, pocketing the money and tiptoeing to the main door. Bending, he peered through a crack and his eyes widened.

“What’s it?” Matipa asked, joining him at the door and peering too, stooped below him.

“Disaster,” he whispered. “The brute is here,” Binga added in a jerky voice, drawing the small axe from his trousers. “He’s kept his promise.”

“Chop his head off. You’re not a woman.”

A completely naked man unmindful of his nudity was approaching their house. Yellow and red ochre covered his torso.

Ash covered his face and head. His strides were long and meant trouble. Across his arms was a limp body. He was quite a disturbing spectacle. "This house is my last line of defence. Today I die or I kill him."

"That's my son he's carrying," Matipa burst into renewed crying. "Peza is dead." She slumped on the floor and began to wail softly.

Binga kept peering outside. "No. That can't be Peza in his arms. That body is adolescent and this man doesn't look like Bomani either. What's happening?"

She stopped wailing. "Hey? Who else could it be besides our son?"

"Come and look. He's closer now. This bugger isn't Bomani. He's too thin and tall."

She collected herself and resumed her peering position. "My God! That's Jatrophia."

"You told me he went crazy. Whose body is he carrying then?"

"Vurayai is dead. God rest his soul. This brings the number of the dead to thirteen."

When Johnson Fichani, alias Prophet Jatrophia, was a couple of paces from their house, heavy footsteps interrupted their silence. Matipa couldn't stand his nudity and retreated to the bedroom. The embattled prophet halted a pace from the door.

"I've come that you may have peace and have it more abundantly," Jatrophia shouted to the door, his voice as sermonic as ever, but as peppered as Bomani's. "Rejoice forever more, for I bring good tidings! Around Patchway Mine, crows are circling and gathering! That's my message of deliverance to this house!"

Binga noticed the maniacal look in the man's eyes. The body he was carrying attracted flies. Maggots and faggots fell from it. Its stench pervaded the house. The man placed the body on the threshold and turned to go. People in his direction who had gathered to watch the horrific spectacle scurried away as he walked towards and past them until he was out of sight.

“What did he do?” Matipa asked from the bedroom.

“He left.”

“Thank God. I was scared.”

He turned from the door and walked into the bedroom. “He dumped the body. It’s on our threshold. What’s the meaning of this?”

She looked up at him. “Strange things have been happening since Bomani came. It’s a continuation.”

“People are gathering outside. What do we do?”

“You should be telling me,” she intoned.

“We must run. This could be a prelude to a catastrophe.”

She looked at the axe in his hand with its spirited decorations, and pointed at it. He guessed she was about to say something about the potency of the weapon when the sound of a fast approaching and swerving vehicle reached them. Cries of screaming people jumping out of its way followed the hazardous noise of the vehicle.

Paramilitary wolves! Binga thought, crossing to the bedroom window and opening it. If the soldiers hesitated to shoot, he would outrun them. He sprang onto the ledge and was about to pull the curtain aside and jump out when Matipa gestured to him to wait.

“It’s not what you think,” she said and rushed into the lounge to peer. “Jasper is here.”

Binga jumped back into the room as the speeding vehicle came to an abrupt halt in front of the house. He came to the door and joined his peering wife. Both watched Jasper springing from his topless Land Rover, his muscles taut, but the body by the door froze him in mid-stride. His dog jumped from the vehicle and began barking at the corpse.

Chapter 24

In less than half an hour, the couple had debriefed Jasper indoors of the kidnapping and the subsequent deaths at the hospital and in the compound, and their sudden unpopularity in the community. Matipa did most of the talking as her husband sat beside her in the lounge, cracking his knuckles.

Binga's contribution had been largely demoralizing. He talked about Bomani as a grotesque character backed by unlimited charms and talismans, a beast no sane man could confront, but Matipa thought her brother and he were a formidable force.

Jasper had many questions. Was Akar Muja Binga Jochoma? If Akar was Binga, why had he used a false name all the years they had known him? How had he wronged this Bomani to warrant the murder of innocent souls and disruption of life and business at the mine?

Matipa and her husband agreed the questions were impertinent, what was relevant was finding Peza dead or alive. Jasper reasoned that if it was indeed true Binga had lied, he had to compensate his wife materially for emotional damage after the storm was over. Binga neither agreed nor disagreed.

The three knew that the entire compound was watching the house from a distance. Vurayai's body was still on the threshold. Logically, someone might have notified the mill manager of the macabre development, who in turn called the police. The two men understood they had to leave the mine without further delay or the arrival of the police would thwart their hunt for Bomani, and Binga would end up in solitary confinement.

"Where do we look for the animal?" Jasper asked.

"Patchway Mine," Binga answered. "The berserk prophet gave us the clue."

Jasper gapped his mouth. "It sounds crazy."

Matipa said matter-of-factly, “I had a dream in which the former prophet featured as a cardinal compass.”

“The corpse outside,” Jasper said inadequately and paused “What happens to it?”

“Its clearance is a function of the police,” Binga answered. “Word travels faster than light here. I’m sure by now someone has told Gilchrist everything and he’s contacted the scavengers for the job.”

Binga excused himself briefly and went into the bedroom. Alone, he prepared for a possible terminal fight by offering prayers to the ancestors for protection or passage to the realm of the dead. He bemoaned lack of time to revisit Mupamombe’s grave as Mjomba, the Malawian sorcerer, had bidden him. Recalling instances of bravery and valour in the army, and the people who fell by his hand on the Shurugwi-Chegututu gold-belt, an inner assurance he could pound Bomani to death, or into submission, gradually rose in him.

Bomani was a marauder; he too was one. Whether the brute saw himself metaphorically as a matador or a hangman, he too was all that. Mjomba endowed him the spirit of a bull; hence, he subdued and killed a number of men on emerging from the tunnels of Patchway Mine. He was a dangerous man by any definition. If ever he stood toe-to-toe with Bomani Kumanda, it would be two hangmen in the shadow of the other, two juju-certified men tactfully swinging the noose for an opportune moment. Whoever found a break first and took advantage of it would descend tall the scaffold’s steps while the other dangled.

When he returned to the lounge, Jasper was showing his sister two bowie knives on his person; one sheathed inside the waist of his trousers, the other in his left boot.

“If he won’t submit, I’ll break all his bones and cut him into dinner-size portions,” Jasper said. “I don’t think anyone can be tried and hanged for killing the brute.”

“Have you ever killed a man before?” Binga asked, looking down at him in a sofa.

The question visibly dispirited Jasper. He shook his head. “No, but everything has a first time. I’ll be happy to terminate this man.”

“The man came looking for me. When we meet him, you’ll allow me to tackle him alone. It’ll give you an appreciation of his capabilities. We must come back alive, *with* or *without* Peza. My father taught me that in whatever a man does, he must not die. Death, not the Devil, is a man’s worst enemy. What do you say?”

“I’ll let you tackle him.”

“Thank you. When I’m stricken and down, and you’re sure I can’t rise again, that’s when you can challenge him.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Matipa protested. “You’re instilling fear in him.”

“I’m being realistic, Matipa. I’m not a politician. Your brother’s life and mine will be at stake at Patchway Mine.”

“But we could set the police on him,” she said thoughtfully. “Yes, you may not need to fight him.”

“I’m sure our boy is alive, Matipa. Bomani has sentries. Once they see the police approaching, Bomani’ll kill the boy ruthlessly. It defies the objective.” He sighed, in part exasperated by her compulsion, in part dreading to yield to bait. “Don’t let anyone know I’ll be coming back. I don’t want to find the paramilitary police waiting for me.”

“I don’t care,” she sneered. “All I want is my son.”

“You heard me.” He looked at the roof for a few seconds. “You believe in God,” he said quietly, “call on Him to watch our backs.”

The prayer request was his farewell. He nodded at Jasper: it was time.

“We’ll discipline the brute and bring back Peza,” Jasper assured his sister.

“Bring my son back, no matter the cost,” Matipa hissed at her husband as the men made for the door. “To a funambulist, the

ground is death. When he walks between tall structures, lizards nod in agreement that one day the performer will smash to his death. Right thinking people don't mourn funambulists who perish at work."

Binga turned and made a face. "You think you're sacrificing me?"

"You've lived by the sword. Admit it."

"Let me tell you something, Matipa. By remaining behind, you and everyone in this compound could be digging your graves. In all our movements, only God knows whether we're walking into disaster or away from it. It's not by chance Bomani didn't find me home."

"I want my son back. That's all I'm saying." She paused. "He stressed you should come with a black hen."

"Damn! You told me already! Stop acting like his spokesperson!"

Jasper unlatched and opened the door. A strong stench hit their nostrils. He stepped over the corpse, rousing a swarm of flies. Binga followed suit, indifferent to the body, the stench, the flies and the wide circle of scared onlookers. His emergence caused a visible stir and a loud collective murmur. As Jasper went to a solitary pole where he had leashed the dog, the ex-commando scanned familiar faces watching, reading nothing but contempt and fear on them. His crude perception was that the people put him in the same league as Bomani Kumanda, and hated him with every nuance of hatred in them.

Binga didn't care. On the contrary, there was a raising sense of honour and valour in him. He was going to Patchway Mine about forty kilometres away to do single-handedly what an entire compound chickened from doing. He was going to confront the demon and possibly perish in the process. If Bomani beat him senseless and toothless, or dead, he would go down with honour like a vigilante. He wouldn't walk with his head bowed in sorrow, humility or regret as though he re-crucified Jesus by absconding from his family for three and a half weeks.

Like a gladiator he walked; chest inflated, arms swinging belligerently, ready to pummel anyone who dared shout obscenities at

him. He climbed onto the jeep, sat on the passenger's seat, and watched Jasper, wishing he could swiftly free the dog and speed the car to the mysterious rendezvous. Matipa popped her head through the door and stared at him over the corpse. He guessed he read the expression on her face: *Don't bother to return without him.*

As his brother-in-law struggled with the knot, from the depths of Binga's being arose a feeling nondescript like sepia, which translated into a prophetic ambivalent voice: *At Patchway Mine, I'll meet my death. I'm foolish. Bomani Kumanda condemned me, yet I fasten blinkers on my temples and head to a guillotine. The ground is wet. Bomani'll beat me into the ground. No mortal ever fought a spirit and won.*

Suddenly, from the left, women shrieked in panic. From the corner of his eye, Binga saw a man running to him, something in his right hand glittering in the sun. Turning his head, his mind puzzled by the development and at the same time bracing for an abrupt confrontation with his enemy, Binga doubted if his sight was serving him right.

Of all the people, an infuriated Boniface Chipendo, Remegio's father, had broken from the gathering and was definitely coming to cut him with a knife, his eyes and speed said it all. Less than forty metres stood between him and the middle-aged man with the build of a bulldozer. The man was in an off-white long-sleeved shirt and a pair of khaki trousers.

Matipa screamed, alerting him of the danger, but Binga was already in mid-air, springing from the vehicle. He ran towards the threat, his fists clenched. Matipa had told him the man was moving around with a three-starred Okapi knife. No doubt, it was the one shining in the sun. When they met, Boniface swung the knife at Binga's throat in a horizontal swing. The attack could've beheaded him had he not ducked. In a split-second counter-attack, the ex-commando head-butted him in the sternum, halting him like a concrete wall.

Boniface staggered, dropping the knife and grabbing his lower chest with both hands, but Binga was already pounding his eyes and temples with clenched fists. The blows hauled Remegio's father backwards. When Boniface finally slumped on his back, the momentum throwing his legs into the air, Binga had nearly butchered him.

Recognizable voices from the bystanders screamed and shouted at Binga not to kill the man. They said the compound had already seen enough blood as it were, and the presence of Vurayai's corpse at his doorstep called for reverent behaviour. Blunt and unkind people called him a murderer and told him the police was on the way.

Binga stood over Boniface and watched blood gush from eyebrow cuts, his nose and corners of his mouth. Leaving an enemy alive, especially one who knew him and could plot against him, wasn't his custom. Nevertheless, forasmuch as he vied to finish off the man, he restrained himself. There were many witnesses. Eventually, he clicked his tongue in anger, turned and walked back to the jeep, sighing endlessly. He was opening the car door when another wave of screams alerted him of danger, rousing him to look over his shoulder.

Boniface was on his feet and staggering towards the knife. Binga watched him pick the knife and limp towards him, remotely hoping the spectators would discourage the beaten man from continuing with the fight. He had never killed in public. This other side of him Matipa was witnessing first-hand he would rather hide for as long as it took. No one shouted anything to Boniface.

"You hid inside when my son was being set on fire," Boniface alleged, advancing. "Kill me or I kill you, then it'll be settled."

"You'll die for nothing," Binga warned. "My family and I are also victims in this matter. I don't fight for a name or honour. Shackle your demons, Boniface, or you'll see my wrath."

"I want to see your wrath, murderer. Where's your remorse?"

Binga pointed at him sternly. “Boniface, if you’ve come to be slaughtered, I welcome you to your death.”

Boniface halted, perhaps reconsidering.

It gave Binga an opportunity to address the crowd. “You’re all my witnesses this day, 11 December! Boniface Chipendo is asking me to kill him! He’s come to my house in your presence to beg me to take his life! No one who comes to someone’s residence and is maimed or killed will attract the sympathy of the police or the courts! If he makes three more steps towards me, I’ll take it as a challenge and give him in good measure what he’s seeking!”

Boniface staggered two paces forward. Binga made a step towards him.

“No!” Matipa shouted behind him.

“Stay out of it, Matipa!” He shouted without taking his eyes off the bleeding man. His maxim was never to underestimate any opponent. “This is extraneous to our differences! All you want is Peza no matter the cost! Don’t queen over me in public! I’m warning you!”

Boniface and Binga stood still, the former drunkenly rocking on the spot. Silence prevailed. Then the onlookers suddenly shouted and whistled to the bereaved father to turn back and walk away from a killer. The ex-commando wrung his hands to ease the impact pain in his fists. The bloodied man raised a foot to advance, but he suddenly held his head and collapsed to the ground.

Binga knew no one would come to Boniface’s aid unless he stepped out of the way. He turned and was soon in the topless jeep, adjusting the axe in his trousers for comfort. Jasper brought the dog to the car and climbed onto the driver’s seat. The dog jumped onto the back and began perambulating dangerously, agitated by the murmuring and cursing crowd.

“What’s going on here, brother?” Jasper asked.

“This is worse than the Wild West. Floor the accelerator.”

The Land Rover mooded, swerving and raising plumes of dust as it sped out of the compound, people scampering for their safety. In less than a minute, they were turning left from a dirt road onto the Harare-Bulawayo highway. They'd drive to Kadoma about twenty-two kilometres away and then turn west at the town's only robot-controlled intersection. Patchway Mine was eighteen kilometres from the intersection along the Kadoma-Sanyati road.

For some minutes, they drove in silence, rushing wind swishing and howling continuously in Binga's ears. Binga watched the speedometer needle rise to a hundred and forty kilometres per hour. As usual, traffic was sparse. Economic sanctions were biting.

"Hey!" Jasper exclaimed suddenly, and went on to comment thoughtfully: "Twelve fresh graves, a decaying corpse at your doorstep, a naked prophet and an angry community... that's a nasty situation back there!"

Binga looked away. He wanted to concentrate on Bomani Kumanda and occupy himself with how he would tackle him. His brother-in-law was worrying about trivialities, instead of an inconceivably nefarious robber and murderer who stopped at nothing. Four years ago, he humiliated the brute and killed at least two of his men at Gudyanga near Birchenough Bridge. Because he knew that the devil had an appetite for revenge and nurtured enmity, Binga had fled Manicaland in an attempt to put a wide berth between the two of them. Bomani's coming to Sakis Mine in pursuit of a man who foiled his ambush and robbed the ambushers instead, was an ostensible sign the killer had armoured himself dangerously over the years. By kidnapping Peza and setting Remegio on fire, he had exhibited rage nurtured over time.

How could he tell Jasper the man they were pursuing was an avant-garde brute more unpredictable and lethal than a ninja? How could he tell his movie-influenced brother-in-law physical strength and martial arts skills alone were nothing to Bomani?

“This Bomani,” Jasper shouted again above the backlash of the wind. “Matipa said he was very courteous. What kind of a man is he?”

“The civility is a whitened sepulchre concealing a monster! He’s thoroughly cruel!”

“Are you trying to scare me out?”

“I’m being honest. He passes decrees like an Arabic sultan, yet he bivouacs in old graveyards like a lunatic! I hope you’re not afraid of graves!”

“No ways! I know someday I shall die and be buried six feet down!”

“Bomani daily surpasses himself in brutality!”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Don’t talk fiction!”

“I shouldn’t waste my breath. You’ll meet him!”

“You seem certain! You believed the mad prophet?”

Binga nodded. “I’m not sure if the prophet is messianic or anarchical, but one thing for certain is that his prophecies are often exact!”

Jasper looked worried for some time, and then he chuckled. “He cannot be stronger than an adult Nile crocodile!” He mimicked curling a dumbbell with his left arm and added, “If there’s air in Bomani’s lungs and blood in his veins, I’ll kill him!”

“That’s good to hear, brother, but be equally prepared to be killed! When he kills you, don’t be afraid to die, just a word of advice from an executed serial killer!”

They reached the City of Kadoma in silence. As Jasper slowed down and manoeuvred the town’s roads bustling with loiterers and strollers, and cellular airtime vendors criss-crossing the streets to make sales, Binga noticed that his brother-in-law was pensive. He guessed he was considering aborting the mission, but pride had gotten the better of the crocodile catcher. Jasper struck him as an Egyptian cobra. He didn’t back away no matter the odds, the archetypal man who died defending a name or honour.

“Pass through the greens marketplace,” Binga said, pointing to his left.

“Why? Don’t you want it done with and forgotten today?”

“The hen, Jasper. At least I must meet that demand. I’ll appear less provocative to him. Perhaps I can appeal to his reason and we can talk. Bloodshed should be the last option.”

Jasper steered the jeep to the marketplace. Binga alighted and ran to a live chicken vendor at the back of the vegetable market. He came back with a shackled hen.

Jasper looked at him incredulously as he got into the jeep and placed the fowl between his feet on the rubber mat. “Are you colour-blind? She said *black* hen. *Black*. That’s a white off-layer.”

“I know what I’m doing, Jasper. I thought you watched movies. A family reluctant to meet a ransom often packs trash in a bag to excite and lure the kidnapper.”

“Your idea has to be good or your boy will be hurt.”

“It’s now in the hands of the gods. Step on the pedal.”

From the CBD they turned left at the town’s solitary and ever defunct robot-controlled intersection and took the Kadoma-Sanyati road along which Patchway Mine began on the eighteen-kilometre peg. The mining establishment was a transitory point to Sanyati, to the left, and Chakari Mine, further on in a straight line. From Kadoma to Patchway they overtook three decked all-terrain passenger carriers packed with smiling and chatting European and Asian tourists.

“This isn’t the way to Kariba or the Victoria Falls,” Jasper commented after overtaking the third carrier. “Is there a new tourist resort where we’re heading?”

Binga hated to speak against the wind. “Tomorrow is 12 December! There’ll be a *Gule Wamkulu* Annual Tournament at Patchway Mine! The posters are everywhere!”

“Jeez! *Gule* is popular with foreign tourists?”

“Tourists are people with hungry eyes and poor cost-benefit analysis capabilities! They can travel all the way from Siberia or Canada to tour the ruins of Old Bulawayo!” Binga held his mouth, something suddenly crossing his mind. “We’re on track! The prophet wasn’t bluffing! Our man is definitely in Patchway!”

“Where’s the confirmation?”

“Bomani is a *Gule Wamkulu* practitioner! Definitely today you’ll be privileged to see the Devil!”

“What does he look like?”

“People say at times he looks like Sir Alex Ferguson or José Mourinho at a press conference, except that his front teeth are missing and his face is a mask of ebony! Other times he looks like a painted curving!”

“That means he’s human! I’ll break his damn jaw!”

The road to the mine was a tarred stretch meandering gently between under-utilised farmlands. Lacklustre old rural shops welcomed them cheerlessly into the mine. There was a noticeable development, milling tourists and their tents pitched on every available space at the shops. Jasper slowed down the vehicle and looked at Binga for further instructions.

“I’ve been to this mine before, several times. It’s surrounded by numerous old graveyards to the north and west.”

“So? Talk, brother.”

“We’ll split up. One of us will take the Sanyati road and go round westwards and clockwise. The other will take the Chakari road and go northwards and then counter-clockwise. In less than ninety minutes, we must meet somewhere. We’ll be searching a small segment. The Pioneer Shaft headgear will help you keep your bearings.” He pointed at the towering structure to the north. “The graveyards are within a radius of two kilometres from these shops.”

“What do I do when I find him?”

“You come back here. I’ll do the same. Reconnaissance will give us an idea of how he’s dug himself in and how and when we can

attack him. Make sure he doesn't see you. If he catches you, look lost or something."

Jasper considered for a while. "Suppose I don't see him?"

"You return to the shops with your car and dog." Binga glanced at his wristwatch. "It's about eleven thirty. Whatever the case, we meet here at one o'clock or thereabouts."

"Who goes north? Who goes west?"

"Make a choice. I'm comfortable with any direction."

Jasper parked the car at the edge of the T-junction where the road to Sanyati branched from the Kadoma-Chakari road, and turned the engine off. For some seconds he consulted his survival instincts, quietly pointing to the north and the west alternatively until he kept pointing towards Chakari. "The north it is. I'll go counter-clockwise."

"Then clockwise is mine...the west." Binga picked the hen. "Do me a favour. Please drop me about eight hundred metres westwards. Then you can drive to this junction and take the Chakari road. Park the vehicle almost the same distance northwards. Make sure you leave Toshla leashed to the car. You don't want him barking when you're spying."

"Don't worry about him. He doesn't bark on a mission." Jasper started the car and turned left onto the Patchway-Sanyati road. "If there's a dog good at obeying commands, that's Toshla."

As Jasper drove, Binga took the final opportunity to reiterate that Bomani Kumanda was a very dangerous person, but Jasper sneered at him and raised a hand that silenced him.

Chapter 25

The passage of four years hadn't blurred Bomani's face in Binga Jochoma's mind. As he trudged in the woods and underbrush of the western outskirts of Patchway Mine, Bomani's face kept flashing on his mindscape, but he brushed it aside with thoughts of Peza and reminded himself his son was the issue, not the devil of devils. Reverting to Peza spurred him on with thoughts of valour; otherwise, his reflections of the brute unleashed shivers in him. Moving in a wide arch northward, the portrait of his enemy intermingling with that of his son, he feared the *Gule Wamkulu* practitioner could be spying on him from a vantage point, and he was walking into an ambush.

Unbelievably he was in the lawless eastern part of the mine two weeks ago when he ventured underground, which provoked him to think of Gillian and the money he squandered. When he relived the moment Matipa gave him the bowl with his girlfriend's name in it, he nearly suffered palpitations. It was strange that through the prophet Matipa had known about Nomathemba and the university student. As he walked, Binga scolded himself for detracting himself with impertinent thoughts.

The area was a wooded expanse of flat land broken here and there with unfenced maize fields, efforts of the locals at urban farming. His progress was painfully gradual, but he liked it that way; otherwise, he could foolishly hurry to his death. The areas where he had to look were easily identifiable, pieces of red cloths flying from tall trees marked them. The materials warned members of the public or rival *Gule Wamkulu* participants to keep away. To some places, the distinct drumbeat of the mystic dancers attracted him.

Because he was sweeping the area thoroughly, he moved stealthily in the woods, at times crouching, at times crawling where the shrubs were low or the area was almost bereft of vegetation. The

camps were numerous and dotted in the bush. But he spied on all he saw or heard, in some cases finding masked men rubbing elixirs on themselves amid graves, in others spying on them while they were lost in the throes of frantic dancing and drumbeating. Some he found asleep. In one camp, he saw no one but a collection of fiery wooden masks hanging on the bough of a tree. Below the masks were fowl feathers and blood.

He kept an eye for snakes; such outskirts were home to banded cobras, black and green mambas. As he zigzagged, crept, crouched and crawled, he recaptured his commando spirit. If any camp discovered him spying, they could detain and torture him, if they had the strength to apprehend him. His captors could forcibly initiate him into their secret society.

Binga wished he had brought his pair of binoculars, equipment he forgot because of Matipa's sneering and inconsideration for his life. He begrudged her for behaviour he found unbecoming of a married woman towards her breadwinning husband. Perhaps it was out of anger and frustration that she had developed the coldness towards him. Perhaps the demons that had maddened her prophet were also upon her to some extent. He had no certain answer. He hoped once he presented Peza to her, she would welcome him again into her life and be affectionately his again.

He continued northeast, somewhat an unmasked ninja one with the greenery and the ground. His wristwatch showed 12:35 pm. By now, he should've long met the crocodile tracker because he was less than twenty minutes from where Jasper parked his car and started. Was it excitable Jasper had searched counter-clockwise in an arch too wide for them to meet? Could he have failed to see the significance of the red clothes high up the trees? Binga had a hunch something was wrong. From the time they left Sakis Mine, he had a firm premonition Jasper would be slaughtered.

The thought that Jasper in Boman's custody would be a lump of fat in an inferno was tormenting him when he looked to the left of

the headgear, the mine's icon. There was a cluster of indigenous and eucalyptus trees about five hundred metres from the mine's northern perimeter fence. A red cloth flew on the tallest local tree. In the sky above the area circled about a score of noisy black birds. Squinting, Binga scrutinised them, their colours and flying patterns. He feared they could be vultures and Peza was dead, but they were pied crows. Except for that part of the sky, the doom was void of swarms of birds.

He edged towards the trees about three hundred metres away. As he got nearer, he thought he discerned some incoherent voices and a groan, but when he stopped to listen, he heard nothing. Thorny thickets barricaded the cluster. He went round it, watching where his feet were landing and where he was going, convinced he had heard some voices or a groan. As he searched for a way past the thickets, he came across a small clearing about two metres in diameter. In the centre were a dead fire and a clay bowl. In the vessel was a dead crow. The items were fetish. In the ash around the fire were fresh, barefoot adult footprints.

A beaten footpath stretched to the thicket a stone throw away. Binga followed the footprints, stopping several times to listen and look over his shoulder. The sounds he had heard seemed to have come from the grove. Yet it was all quiet now, except for the gawks of the crows circling in the sky. However trailing a beaten path was tantamount to throwing caution to the wind. Along normal access points, robbers and armies alike laid ambushes. He stepped from the rough path and went round the coppice to the left.

The area had numerous disused and unprotected amateur shafts. A foul smell came from several of them, an indication the shafts were death traps. Either domestic animals or people had fallen to their death in these pits, and nobody had bothered to retrieve the bodies.

Cautious of falling into a shaft or stepping on serpents, he finally found a small opening in the thicket and crept through on all fours. Mid-way, he stopped, still crouched. The thickets surrounded a

recently cleared area as evidenced by tree stumps bleeding sap. The clearing was about half the size of a tennis court, rugged and studded with the remnants of the trees. Three *Gule Wamkulu* drums lay on the far edge of the area. An old cork tree on the same side as the drums bore the red cloth. He noticed mounds of earth and cairns characterised the piece of land, and the features couldn't be anything beside old graves.

The place was deserted. Where could the humanly sounds have emanated from? Holding his breath for unimpeded hearing, he became aware of an almost imperceptible dripping sound to his right, yet there was no running water and the trees weren't rain-soaked. Binga crawled to his right underneath thin, leafless branches and snapping twigs with white-tipped thorns.

As he crawled and endured the pricks of the unforgiving thorns, a conviction mounted inside him that by coming to Patchway Mine he had come to an ignominious close, to his death. His blood would be on Matipa's hands. Suddenly he came to a tree in a smaller clearing in the thicket, and held his breath. First, he saw a scarlet pool the size of a hand-washing bowl under the tree. Blood was dripping into it. The pool rippled and swelled before him. He looked up the tree and tried to believe he was seeing an illusion.

Jasper hung from the tree upside down like a bat. He reeked of faeces. Pieces of barbed wire bound his wrists and ankles. Ruthlessly beaten almost beyond recognition, he was drenched in flowing blood, which was dripping into the pool. His lips quivered as vomit mingling with blood dripped from his mouth. He shook like one suffering from acute hypothermia. Jasper was going through a painful death in front of his eyes.

Binga went into a forlorn panic, many fears overwhelming him. Though blood gushed from Jasper, for the sake of remaining within his faculties, Binga took refuge in denial, electing to see everything as part of a schizophrenic illusion. Not on any battlefield had he seen anyone bleeding in rivulets like that. Wherever the wound was, loss

of blood was certainly killing Jasper, if he wasn't already dead. He had to do something to save him. Binga abruptly straightened, and, springing, vaulted twice over two punitive shrubs before landing near his brother-in-law suspended about a metre from the ground. He was about to touch him and see how he could bring him down when a voice checked him. The speaker was behind him, and the voice was sangfroid and distinctly familiar.

"Bomani sincerely welcomes you to this corporate meeting, brother." The voice was priestly. "Thank you for heeding the subpoena and averting a massacre at Sakis this time tomorrow. This was thoughtful of you, Binga, Bomani must say."

Binga turned slowly, his heart thumping, sweat dampening his armpits. Bomani was in sickeningly dirty clothes. Through gaps in the bushes, he saw he was barefoot and stood alone where Binga had started his nervous crawl to the tree. "Where's my son?" He asked firmly, glad his voice wasn't tremulous and betraying the fear knotted in him.

"You and Bomani are professionals cut from the same silk," Bomani went on calmly, still rooted amid thorns. "We live in a violent and hierarchal world. Men have always fought. Look at the routine massacres of the Vikings, the Huns, the Assyrians, now a stateless nation, the Vandals and the Romans. They fought against themselves and decimated other tribes. The Romans were brutal, but barbaric tribesmen, former underdogs, eventually outdid the Romans in butchery by sacking Rome."

The brute was throwing him off-balance mentally, unhinging him. "Where's my son? Don't try to confuse me. What exactly do you want?"

Bomani grinned. "Do you know how this country was colonised? Cecil John Rhodes didn't bring with him the population of Britain. He mobilized only a few brutes. Military power did the rest." He whistled and four stone-faced, machete-armed men in soiled overalls stood up from the vegetation.

Binga realised the men had surrounded him all along. Apart from the men around him, he knew there was a gunner out of sight.

“Bomani saw Jasper loitering in off-limit areas and smelled trouble. His men captured and caressed your brother-in-law a little. When the smooching was light, he said he was lost. Bomani reminded him this wasn’t the Australian Outback. Bomani warned him he would lose some teeth. He told us you were coming from the other direction with a *white* hen. For interest’s sake, where’s the *white* hen, Binga?”

“I was afraid it would make some noises. I left it at a homestead near the road to Sanyati.”

“A *white* hen,” Bomani said sardonically. “What despicable disobedience!”

“I meant to propose peace.” He gestured at Jasper behind him. “Please, free him. He’s nothing to do with our differences. He’s bleeding to death.”

Bomani chuckled. “You talk peace yet in your pants you carry an axe. Take it out and throw it in the arena.” He pointed at the clearing behind him.

Binga looked at the men around him, his eyes zeroing on their machetes. The men were nonchalant and had the aura to kill him within the minute. He drew the axe from his trousers and flung it into the clearing.

“Are there other weapons on your person?”

Binga nodded. “I’ve a flick knife.”

“Throw it into the arena, Mr Peace-Proposal.”

From a right hip pocket, he took out the knife and threw it as ordered. “I’ve complied. Let my brother-in-law go or he’ll die here.”

“Look up the tree and tell Bomani what you see.”

He did, and his eyes widened. Binga was both astonished and relieved. Toshla, the dog, also hung upside down directly above Jasper, its mid-section slit longitudinally, its offal hanging out. Ligaments held the dog’s head to the torso. The carcass was dripping

blood onto its master. In the back of his mind, it dawned on him Bomani was possibly using his brother-in-law as a sacrifice in the making of a fetish.

“Your brother-in-law walked into the wrong hands,” Bomani Kumanda said phlegmatically in open admiration of his handiwork up the tree. “He came sauntering like a bride down an aisle. At the pulpit, he found an ex-priest waiting for him, and was baptised. John the Baptist baptised with water. He whom Luke was unworthy to unloose the latchet of whose shoes baptised with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Bomani baptises with blood and curses with death, the last enemy God shall destroy. On the second death, when he who had the power of death is dead, God shall cast into the lake of fire those Bomani baptised. Revelations says Death and Hell shall be cast into the lake of fire.”

Binga couldn’t bear the sardonic, unwarranted sermon. He looked up the tree again, at shivering Jasper and the carcass of his dog, and couldn’t take his eyes off the horrendous exhibition. Matipa and her family would hold him accountable for Jasper’s death. Bomani continued his rhetoric behind his back.

“To Bomani, that was a sign of bad luck on Jasper’s person, which needed special cleansing. He’s undergoing free cleansing. If he survives the beating, he’ll attract good fortune and pretty women the rest of his life. One day he may find it proper to reward Bomani for his effort. Unfortunately, Jasper is a bulldog on the outside and a shrivelled worm in the inside. It appears he’s expiring and happy to be giving up the ghost under the circumstances.”

Binga turned and faced his archenemy. Time was of the essence or Jasper would die. “This man you caught is out of it. He must be in hospital.”

“He *is* in hospital. Bomani *is* the doctor. Afraid to die, he took this from his pocket and gave it to Bomani.” He dipped his right hand into a hip pocket and drew a fistful of money, which he spread out like a Chinese paper fan and held out. “One thousand and five

hundred American dollars. He paid his doctor cash for the blood transfusion.”

“You’re a sick man, Bomani.”

Bomani laughed lightly and pocketed the money. “No. Bomani is a mortal man. He bears grudges, masturbates, swears and curses God and the Devil in the same breath. Bomani is not of this world.” He sized Binga with his eyes. “Four years ago you killed my men and took me for a woman. I was hurt when you copulated on me and went on to rob me. Bomani bears grudges, but malice didn’t send him to Sakis Mine. Grudge is mean, retrogressive and destroys its bearer. Bomani’s motive is profit.”

“Get to the point. What do you want?”

“Bomani has a high regard for your great fighting prowess and survival feats. Bomani, just like you, is a man of juju. Bomani has resigned his life to spirits and juju.”

“Is that why you kidnapped my son and set a man on fire?”

“Bomani seeks a business pact with you. He’s looking at the possibility of a merger.”

“I don’t get it. Is that why so many people are dead... the possibility of a merger?”

“Both of us are beasts by any definition. Bomani believes he’s the beast of the beasts. He came to Sakis Mine to recruit you, but Bomani isn’t a dictator. Should you defeat him, you become the boss and give orders. Nothing stops the merger.”

“What if I’m not interested?”

“That would be most unfortunate. Bomani’ll kill your boy as recompense for lost time and what executives call opportunity costs. He’ll banish you from this country. It’s too small for two killers to prowl freely without running into each other or chasing the same prey. Bomani has heard several stories, but never has he heard about two hangmen operating on one scaffold at the same time. Let the scaffold teem with the condemned, but only one hangman shall man it.”

“What guarantee do I’ve that my son is alive? I must see my boy now before we do anything.”

“Bomani has no objection.” He turned and gestured to him to follow him.

Crouching in some places, Bomani walked through the coppice onto the stump-studded clearing. Binga followed him, the men wielding the machetes maintaining the circle around him and moving with him. He tried to look ahead of the killer in anticipation of seeing his son, though he was afraid the brute might have long maimed or killed his boy. A demon was sorrow incarnate, by nature incapable of bringing joy to anyone’s heart.

Bomani crossed the clearing and got onto a footpath through the other side of the thorn trees. He suddenly stopped and pointed to his left at a wooden structure that looked like a barbarian goat coop. The primitive cage was amid camouflaging shrubs a couple of paces from the footpath. Bomani retraced his footprints.

Something bundled into a foetal position was in the cage. Binga hurried to the warren, thorns ruthlessly scratching him. Around it were six grass-thatched hovels. When he reached the structure, he fell on his knees and peered inside. His jaw dropped. Rage possessed him immediately. The men had tediously tied Peza to a pole inside the construction. He was frail, in dirty clothes and motionless. Binga corked an ear through a gap in its wall. Time stood still. Peza was breathing. He heard him exhaling and inhaling like one in deep sleep. Two men grabbed Binga and dragged him to the clearing where Bomani was now standing near the drums. Binga wanted to stand and face up with his adversary, but his knees buckled on their own volition.

He sat down shuddering. Normally he was at his most effective pouncing at an unsuspecting victim. Now he wasn’t only in the belly of the beast, but the same animal kept a wary eye on him. If he didn’t submit to his enemy’s demands, it was clear Bomani would kill him. Bomani was far from the man who would deliver a vulnerable boy to

its widowed mother, which irked Binga. The killer wouldn't burden himself, which meant three bodies, Jasper's, Peza's and his, would lie forlorn in the outskirts of Patchway Mine until someone stumbled on them or scavengers devoured them.

As the evil he dreaded towered over him, Binga reckoned it wasn't beneficial to mourn himself and die several times before Bomani laid his hands on him. Blaming Matipa for sending him and her brother to their death wasn't an escape route from the dilemma. Here he was; powerless, trembling and held captive in *Gule Wamkulu* skulduggery near the venue of a merry annual tournament that had attracted international tourists.

Binga reminded himself he wasn't an ordinary man. He was a man of juju and a brute of Bomani's magnitude, if not more, as the enigma itself had acknowledged. About two hours ago, he had beaten Boniface Chipendo into a stupor. About three and a half weeks ago, Mjomba spiritually fortified him. Yet Binga thought he had nothing to lose by trying to talk Bomani into settling for an amicable solution. Binga cleared his throat to speak, but his enemy addressed him.

"A board chairman thinks in terms of conglomerates and mergers. A killer thinks in terms of killing. Perhaps you're thinking you can beat your way out or at least kill some of my men. Bomani takes this opportunity to remind you that his gunner is out of sight. You don't know where he's, but he's aiming his AK 47 at the small goat you saw in the pen. Once you leave the arena," Bomani made circular gestures with both hands in reference to the perimeter of the clearing, "Bomani's men will hack you to death. You might say you could dodge their machetes. Yes, you could, but once you step out of the arena, the sharpshooter will mow you down. He's under strict instructions." He turned to the men. "Warm the drums."

The men immediately converged at the cloddish instruments with ethnic engravings, and took them to the edge of the clearing where there were dry sticks, chips and firewood arranged for a small bonfire. Bereft of ashes and burnt wood, evidently the men hadn't lit

any fire in the area before, which showed Binga Bomani had been planning all his moves and had doubtlessly anticipated his coming on this day. One of the men lit a match and a fire was soon crackling. The men squatted and quietly warmed the three drums, the machetes within their easy reach. They gazed at Binga as if he were quarry, giving him the impression of zombies.

“I heeded your summons, Bomani,” Binga began. “State your demands. What you’re talking isn’t civilised.”

“If you knew the history of *civilised* nations, you would seal your mouth. In the Vatican, factionalism disjoins the Curia.” He stopped and seemed to ponder, then proceeded. “In 1598 at the Battle of Yellow Ford, Hugh O’Neil, the nephew of Shane, Earl of Tyrone, in his bid to prevent the Anglicization of Ireland, trounced the English. The statutes that followed ordered English settlers from intermarrying with the Irish, or adopt their customs or speak their tongue. In 999 AD at Glenmama, near Dublin, the Irish conquered the Danes. Back then Dalriada was a kingdom in north-eastern Ireland....”

Binga knew he was at risk of a maniac maddening him. He clasped his ears with his hands until Bomani’s lips stopped moving, and then brought his hands to roost on the ground in a humble posture.

“Both of us are killers,” Bomani went on. “If at all you must respect Bomani, Bomani has to earn that respect. Bomani wouldn’t want to impose himself otherwise. Should you win, Bomani’ll keep his word and bow to you. You’ll call the shots, like Bomani said, and be the major shareholder in our merger.” He paused and grinned. “But,” he held out a finger, “should Bomani win the fight, you’ll be under him. Bomani’ll be the major shareholder. Our first and last job will be at the strong-room holding Chiadzwa’s diamond stockpile in Marange.”

“Don’t dare,” Binga interrupted. “Scores of armed soldiers and police officers guard the stockpile 24/7.”

“Unbelief is a sin, says the Book of Jude,” Bomani burst. “Don’t irritate Bomani with your unbelief.” For a while, he cracked one knuckle after the other. “After the collaboration, Bomani’ll give you a befitting share and immediately part ways with you. He has a home to return to in the land of his fathers. He has spirits and gods in Lake Malawi to pay homage. In the land of his forefathers he shall find himself a wife and settle, and it shall be well with him and with you.”

One thing was certain: defeatism would see Binga killed. Reminding himself the arena was the exit of committed matadors; he closed his eyes and reflected. Indeed, he was as murderous as his adversary was. He guessed Bomani had taken every precaution to summon him and protect himself based on fear. The savage somewhat feared him. Both men were a lethal danger to each other. On opening his eyes, Bomani motioned him to rise.

“It’s time. The throne is set and vacant. Who’ll ascend the majestic steps?” He nodded to his men, a cue for action.

Binga’s heart pounded. *For Peza I’ll pulverise this brute. Defeat isn’t an option.*

He rose, inhaling loudly to steady his nerves and focus, scrutinising the henchmen. The elements and years of bivouacking had taken their toll on them. They were animals from a morbid world that thought in terms of shedding blood and submission. These men wouldn’t dance for a pittance or millet beer beginning the next day. They lived to please their master and hoped to be as ruthless and feared as Bomani was someday. They had no business entertaining foreign tourists. It was beneath them to pose for photographs with smiling Americans and Europeans. Once he was done with their master, he would kill them. The bodies of Bomani and his bunch of assassins would feed scavengers. They wouldn’t live to perpetuate their master’s legacy of terror upon robbers in the same trade.

Of the four men, only one picked a machete and went to stand at the exit from the clearing. Behind him was the coop holding Peza. The remaining three took a drum each and squatted on them on the

ground. Repositioning themselves some paces from the fire, the men stood in a row. They rubbed the taut hides on the drums and sample beat them. Another nod from their master and the drums exploded into life, their pitch deafening, their somewhat discordant tempos and rhythm invocative and characteristically *Gule Wamkulu*.

Bomani leapt and twirled. Spreading his arms as he mimicked a bird, probably an albatross, he trotted round Binga who stood his ground in a fighting posture, his eyes on his axe resting against a tree stump about six wide paces from him. Bomani went round him about five times and disappeared briefly into the bushes around them.

He returned with a horn and picked a piece of rock on the edge of the clearing. The horn was black and curled and the length of a man's arm. It looked like the horn of a young kudu or impala. They had corked its end with a bundle of dried strips of bark. Almost unmindful of Binga, Bomani felt the ground with his toes for a soft spot, which he found on a time-flattened grave. Knees on the ground, he drove the horn into the earth using the rock as a hammer.

Binga watched him warily, brainstorming devastating combinations to bring him down in the shortest time possible, and kill him. Perhaps after all, his loyalists wouldn't be a problem to him; with their invincible shepherd dead, the men were bound to panic and run for their lives, or there and then declare their allegiance to him.

Bomani rose and came towards Binga, but he was waiting for him with clenched fists. He stepped forward before the savage could bring his guard up. Gritting his teeth, Binga went for the head, striking the forehead, temples and the nose, and drawing blood. Yet Bomani stood his ground and threw a left hook, which caught Binga on the jaw. The blow had the force of a sledgehammer. He staggered backwards and slumped on his side. On the ground, he was vulnerable and knew he had to rise before Bomani kicked him in the face and chest. Struggling to rise, he watched Bomani wipe the blood

flowing from his nose and inspect it closely, his face coalescing into a mask of fury.

Ordinarily, Binga reflected, the initial combination ought to have driven Bomani backwards and caused a concussion in his adversary. Bomani was extraordinarily defiant. The solitary observer and the three men beating the drums remained deadpan. Binga struggled to his feet. His lower jaw hurt and felt dislodged. He touched and moved it, opening his mouth wide twice. It was still in its sockets. Before him Bomani waited, an unhurried man confident of victory.

The men clashed again, but Bomani was faster and shattering. He pounded him forcefully, his clenched fists cruelly hitting Binga in the face until one landed squarely on his nose and another left hook found its mark on the exact spot it had connected to a while ago, again sending Binga staggering and tumbling. His nose bled profusely. Again, he struggled to his feet. The devil would reduce him to grist and marrow if it continued like that.

No, this couldn't be happening. Mjomba had imbued him with the spirit of a bull. He hobbled and planned another combination, one that could fell the brute and accord Binga time to pick the axe and split open his head.

Binga stepped forward and quickly unleashed blows to Bomani's head, jaw and sternum. Before he knew it, Binga was on the receiving end. Bomani's blows felt like landing meteorites on Binga's forehead, which he hammered continuously until he staggered backwards and into the air and landed onto a canopy of a matrix of thorns and twigs that gave in and closed above him as he dropped to the ground. The thorns tore his clothes, pierced into him and lacerated his skin, but they were a lesser devil than the pain from Bomani's punitive blows.

The drumbeat continued, undeterred and frenzied.

He had heard how Remegio was burnt alive, and knew the canopy wouldn't protect him from Bomani's wrath should the brute consider inflicting terminal harm on him. Binga would die fighting. Groaning, he rose through the thorns and returned to the clearing,

finding valour in the consolation that at least the demon in human form was killing him for his son. His strides disoriented, he stood in the clearing and saw blurred visions of Bomani. His sight was gravely impaired. Yet his enemy was bleeding, an encouraging sign of his mortality.

Binga spat blood and clenched his fists. He got into a fighting stance, resolving to dwell on his rival's groin, praying he might kick him between the legs to induce a temporal paralysis, which could accord him time to pick the axe for the kill. From the beginning, he had gone for the head with the vain hope of causing a brain concussion. Now he knew the brute had developed a tendency to protect his head at the expense of his genitals.

Bomani raised a hand to the drummers, stopping the drumbeat forthwith. The sudden absence of the thunderous drumbeat left a whirling sound in Binga's ears. The men picked their machetes and straightened. Already they were sweating in the tropical sun. Bomani's bleeding face was ponderous. With his hands, he wiped blood from his nose and chin. "It's normal for people Bomani fights to fall, but for one to fall thrice and rise thrice to continue fighting is abnormal."

Binga stopped a few paces into the arena. Between them were about five paces. He feared his adversary was about to issue the command for his termination.

Rejoice, Matipa, surely a funambulist is bound to fall to his death. He lowered his hands, resigning himself to his fate though instinctively he began working on an oration that could move Bomani's heart though an inner compulsive voice dissuaded him; a man without a heart was incapable of mercy.

"I can smell the aura of a powerful charm," Bomani announced with conviction and held his left arm around the elbow. "You've an amulet around your left arm. Bomani orders you to remove it."

"What amulet? There were no conditions when we started fighting. Are you sensing defeat?"

“You can’t fool Bomani. Remove your shirt or the boy dies.”

“Suppose you don’t find what you allege is on me, do you declare me winner of this fight?”

“Binga Jochoma, get this. Remove the shirt or the boy dies. Bomani is still in charge. This is your last warning.”

If there was ever a man who performed his word, it was Bomani. Binga slowly undid the buttons of his blood-soaked shirt. Though he was against removing his shirt, the stoppage was somewhat welcome. It gave him time to catch his breath and polish his next attack. Unbuttoning took him a whole minute, every second of whose was under the watchful eyes of his sworn enemy. Then slowly, he peeled off his shirt, a garment torn beyond mending, and dropped it on the ground. Throughout the exercise of removing his shirt, which felt ceremonious because of the expectant eyes on him, Binga sought to psyche Bomani with his eyes.

“There!” Bomani shouted. He pointed at a single string of small red beads wound above Binga’s left elbow joint.

A hand-sewn charm the size of a thump that appeared like a discoloured miniature pillow hung from the string.

“Remove it!” Bomani barked.

With his right hand, Binga grabbed the charm and pulled. The string snapped and he held the talisman in his hand. He wasn’t ashamed Bomani had discovered it. Among murderers, there was neither shame nor honour. Rather, he regretted that the exposure of the charm compromised its lethal potency. “Do you want to eat it?”

“Silly. Throw it away!”

Binga did, whereupon Bomani mimicked the sound of *Gule Wamkulu* drumbeat to his men. The men put down the machetes and picked the drums. The instruments roared with a life of their own, the drummers as resigned as ever.

As before, Bomani spread his arms and trotted around Binga, but this time he was practically ripping his clothes off. Binga stood his ground as the man made his rounds and defrocked to his underpants

like a circus performer. In soiled underpants, he continued to run and finally ripped the scant garment off and stopped in front of Binga in the nude, his clothes strewn in the clearing. Binga looked at his pathetic body, almost a collection of fleshless bones. No doubt, the voracity behind his blows came from juju. His manhood was withered and severely scarred.

Bomani closed the gap and stood before his enemy, presenting himself like a sacrifice, his head tilted to expose the neck, his stance akimbo. This was an open challenge to Binga to try his best jabs; an opportunity Binga never thought would present itself. With both hands, he punched him quickly and alternately on the forehead.

Despite the devastation behind the blows, Bomani stood his ground and shook his head stolidly. Binga was determined to ground him. Leaning back and kneeling slightly, he head-butted him on the sternum to bring his guard up, which he did involuntarily as he held his head and chest at once, at the same time sinking to the ground. Binga exploited the opportunity ruthlessly by squarely kicking him between the legs before the devil's knees buckled. Bomani's hands reached for his groin, but that was rather late, the kick had long connected and he was falling backwards, his sight blank.

For some seconds, he lay motionless on his back and Binga scanned the ground for the axe and saw it through foggy eyes. The weapon lay on the other side of Bomani, and the shortest distance to reach it timely for the kill, in case Bomani recovered, was over his archenemy. Dashing, Binga stepped over the brute and crossed to the axe, his main trade tool. The drumbeat, like a left-handed compliment, continued flawless and triumphant.

Picking the axe, he turned around, in time to see Bomani sitting up mechanically like an awakening corpse. He was in the sitting position, with his legs spread before him, when Binga rushed at him, the weapon raised. He could see the crown of Bomani's head, and aimed the axe's blade at it, expecting to feel the exhilarating sensation

of Bomani's skull as it gave in and the blade sank into his morbid brain.

Bomani's hand shot up and grabbed the axe's short handle. A brief tussle for the weapon ensued, but the savage disarmed Binga and, still seated, cast the weapon far from the clearing. His attack mode unhindered, Binga elbowed him on the fontanel instead. All his weight was behind the strike that Binga fell on him. Rising, Bomani picked him up across his shoulders and began trotting around the clearing, shrieking and shouting incoherently.

After failing to loosen Bomani's grip around his thigh and neck or wriggle free, Binga knew it was time to give up. He pleaded for his life, but his archenemy was now a shrill monster beyond comprehension and communication. No humanly plea, appealed to him. His power was tremendous. Giving Binga the impression of a rhinoceros deranged and intoxicated with the sap of cacti, he continued to trot, increasing the pace and the intensity of the shrieks. The drumbeat pitched and swallowed Binga's pleas. After numerous laps, he ran to the centre and stopped. The world spun in Binga's eyes. The earth and the sky exchanged positions.

Without warning, Bomani leapt into the air and slammed Binga backwards onto the ground. Binga landed head first with a drumbeat-muffled thud while the small of his back hit a tree stump. Clutching the back of his head, he rolled in agony, wincing and kicking. It would've been ideal for him to rise and reduce his vulnerability, but the excruciating pain in his back forbade him.

Bomani rose, again zombie-like, and stood over him. As he winced and kicked, the pain easing to deep throbs, Binga noticed Bomani's bloodied nostrils flared with rage and his eyes were bloodshot. Pressing with a finger one nostril after the other, Bomani blew jets of blood on Binga from his nose.

He stooped, picked Binga by the neck and lifted him to his feet in an asphyxiating grip. A head-butt and Binga, limb and disoriented, floundered backwards and lay on his back. His mouth quickly filled

with blood, and he was beginning to choke. With great effort, he turned and lay on his side. Blood spewed from his mouth.

The drummers were behind him, zealous and resigned as ever. Binga's hearing remained superb though his other senses were failing. From that position, he could only see Bomani's feet as he blew more jets of blood from his bleeding nose, and the fourth henchman wielding the machete. Beyond the henchman was the coop holding Peza. The easterly view faded. Binga passed out.

For how long he was unconscious, Binga could only guess. When he came to it was still day. The drumbeat had died. He was on the exact spot he passed out. A black hen tied to a stump was near his head. From the position of the sun, he estimated he could've been unconscious for about an hour or less. His body hurt. He was still shirtless. However, one of the drummers was dousing him with a cold liquid with a familiar smell. It was kerosene.

On seeing he had come to, the man whistled to others for attention.

Binga heard footsteps behind him, and turned his head scared Bomani could be gesturing to his man to set him alight. Bomani, now dressed in wrinkled drill clothes, and two of his men, joined the douser and stood over Binga.

It was time to plead or he would go up in smoke. "Spare my life...I beg you." The sun stung his eyes. His lower jaw and temples hurt when he spoke. "I'm a family man. I submit to your authority, Bomani. Whatever task you give me, I'll perform to your satisfaction. I'll reimburse twofold what I stole from you."

Bomani appeared to study him to see if he meant what he had just said. "The future and a better life are Bomani's concern. Submitting unconditionally is a wise decision. Bomani believes you. He'll sign you into his team now."

"Very well, sir. Give me the papers and a pen."

“No papers. We’re not educated.” He pointed at the hen. “The signing ceremony begins. Deposit your seed into the fowl. Be quick, we’re hungry.”

Binga turned and lay on his belly before he groaned and got into a kneeling position, and looked at the hen with misgiving. How would he penetrate the bird? Where would he find the insanity to do it? For Peza, he would do anything, he resolved, and became conscious of inexplicable pain in several places in his head. Gingerly, he brought his right hand up and felt the dome of his head. It was now cleanly shaven. He felt painful lumps on it, numerous deep cuts. When he inspected his fingers, he found a ground dark substance on them.

“Don’t worry about the wounds,” Bomani said by way of explaining. “With your axe, an associate cut incisions in your head and rubbed juju into them. A mirror will reveal a crown of twelve wounds capped by one in the fontanel. That was the first phase of your initiation. Now the hen follows. You’ll not question anything.”

“Have you freed my son?”

“Ejaculate in the hen and he’s free. You’ll take him home with you tomorrow when you’ve recovered a bit. One week from now, you’ll have recovered enough to travel to a graveyard near Chiadzwa and join us. Should you default, the juju in your head will make you lose your sanity and die miserably. That’s Bomani’s tracking system. It’s more reliable than GPS.” He turned to his men. “Put the tin of water on the fire while he busies himself with the virgin. Give him the hen now. We don’t have the whole season.”

Binga received the hen with one hand and fumbled with the zipper of his trousers with the other. Just then, the fourth henchmen came running in panic from the direction of the tree on which Jasper and the carcass hung. Everyone turned and looked at the approaching man. Binga noticed he was holding two strips of barbed wire.

“His bother-in-law,” the man said insufficiently when he reached them, and held out the strips of wire.

“What about his brother-in-law?” Bomani demanded, his brow contorting.

“He’s gone. He freed himself.”

Bomani didn’t look bothered. “He lost a lot of blood and his injuries are severe. He’ll drop dead before he reaches the Chakari road. Rush to his jeep and set it on fire.” Reconsidering, he raised a hand. “No. Deflate all the tyres. Bomani doesn’t want a burning jeep by the side of the road attracting undue attention. Start searching from the Land Rover back to this camp.”

“What do we do when we find him?” a man asked.

“Use your machetes. Make sure he won’t rise again. Bomani knows his eyes, bring them to him as proof.”

Binga was disappointed Jasper had disclosed many things to Bomani. Three men left running. Running and swinging their machetes as if they’d already caught their quarry and were decapitating him. Their athleticism and zeal frightened Binga. Undoubtedly, they intended to butcher Jasper on sight, and would scramble to disgorge his eyes.

Chapter 26

Two hours after her husband and Jasper sped away, a marked van from Kadoma Central Police Station arrived with four armed police officers and a battered stainless steel coffin. The container was bloodstained and lidless. The police covered it with a soiled and tattered red blanket, an improvisation for the lid. Mr Artaxerxes Korykos and Gilchrist Keneas stood among the throngs still watching the spectacle and discussing in subdued tones what had happened.

Matipa stood in her sitting room and watched the officers approaching her house, their eyes on the corpse. When they arrived at the threshold, they exchanged glances and stepped over the body into the house without knocking, disturbing a swarm of flies on the corpse. The stench of the corpse seemed to suffocate them.

She wasn't afraid of them or possible interrogation. The compound knew the occurrence of the corpse from start to finish. Having been threatened with death and tortured by the paramilitary officers, elements from the Zimbabwe Republic Police just couldn't be more ruthless and inconsiderate than the soldiers. Nevertheless, she sat in a sofa to give them precedence and avoid appearing arrogant in her house. Yet within, she knew it didn't pay to be docile under the circumstances.

"Mrs Muja?" an officer with a sergeant's arrow on the shoulder asked her.

She nodded. "Good afternoon."

"I'm Sgt Kenge from Kadoma Central."

"I'm Matipa Muja. You're in my house."

"Of course, but if you boast about it we'll take you in for detention and interrogation. We need to know what's happening here."

"No one knows what's happening, Sergeant. That's the truth."

“Where did your husband go? Who came driving a Land Rover?”

“My brother came in the Rover. His name is Jasper. They must have driven to Venice Police Post or Kadoma to fetch the police.”

“What other police? We *are* the police.”

“No one knew you would come. These things aren’t coordinated. The mine manager and owner are not telling us anything.”

“When did your husband return?”

“Early this morning, sir.”

“Is your husband Binga Jochoma?”

“My husband is Akar Muja.”

“I repeat. Is your husband Binga Jochoma?”

“My husband is Akar Muja, sir. At least that’s how I know him.”

“If we discover otherwise, you’ve put yourself in a mess.”

“At least I’m being honest. A person cannot be charged for being honest.”

“Your husband attracted a GBH charge by fighting one Boniface Chipendo who’s at the hospital now.”

“I didn’t see anything. I was in the bedroom. I only heard the noise of a fracas. I don’t know who attacked the other first.”

“Tell us what you know.”

“Later neighbours told me Chipendo had an Okapi and they couldn’t dissuade him from attacking my husband at his house.”

“When is your husband coming back?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that he went to report the dumping of Vurayai’s body at our doorstep.”

With every line of investigation hitting a snag, the sergeant was discouraged. After gathering all the background information that culminated in Jatropa dumping the adolescent’s body at the house, he ordered his men to wear gloves and respiratory masks. “Anyway, I’m not the IO for this case. Our mandate is to collect the body. Det. Sgt Tizora’ll come for details.”

Under the supervision of the sergeant, the officers stepped outside. They placed the body in the coffin, covered it with the

blanket and placed it in the van. Three police officers and five men from the compound left for the forest, one of the police officers taking the blanket with him. The Greek and the mill manager returned to their offices.

Matipa swept the threshold with soap and a lot of water, but flies kept swarming. Using a hoe, she removed a layer of the top soil around the threshold in which the foul water had soaked into, and collected the soil in a plastic bag. The flies swarmed around the bag as she took it to the household refuse pit behind the house.

At the small site tucked in a corner, actually a demarcation with a neighbour, she froze on seeing the bowl her husband cast nestled on ashes, papery and vegetable litter. The scribbling, *Gillian*, stared at her. Akar had warned her against illogically rendering someone insane or dead. She dug a small pit beside the dump and placed the earthen bowl and the bag with the soil in it. It was no longer in her interest to shatter the vessel; her husband had returned. Even if this Gillian were in love with Akar, it would be satanic to kill or wish her dead.

As she covered the bag and the bowl with soil, she wished Gillian would live and shut her mind from speculating on Nomathemba's fate. She returned to sprinkle a powdered detergent and soda on the threshold. Fresh air wafted into the house.

The group that left for the forest returned with Fichani alias *Jatropha* in handcuffs about an hour later. The bony man walked ahead of the group, the blanket partially covering his nudity because through the holes in it, his bottom with caking faeces was visible. Dirt discoloured his face and limbs. He never said a word and looked blankly at people.

Matipa came out of the house and heard the police officers explaining to the dwellers that they weren't arresting the lunatic for murder, but the indecency of his prolonged nudity, his threats to women and potential for rape. They said he was a danger to society and believed a magistrate would commit him to a mental institution.

Chapter 27

The drive from Harare to van Praaah Farm in Kadoma took Lisa Gororo's chauffeur an hour forty minutes. Throughout the drive, Lisa tried in vain Jasper's number and became frustrated and exasperated. It didn't feel good not to know with certainty exactly where a fabulous young man who could charm many women if he went loose foot could be. She regretted her inability to keep material like him under lock and key, otherwise she wouldn't be imagining him in some teenager's arms.

Home she had lounged, reading the newspapers she bought in the city, to fill up with political developments and to keep abreast with the mayhem in the Middle East. *The Herald* had a banner headline that caught her attention: GANG ABDUCTS BOY. Bold but in smaller fonts below the headline was the filler: AND A BELIEVER IS SET AFLAME. The report was horrendous. It talked about the coming of a small team of criminals to a small mining compound between Kadoma and Kwekwe where the gang kidnapped a boy by the name Peza Muja after failing to find his father home. An absurd part was that the kidnappers set on fire an apostolic believer, one *Madzibaba* Remegio, a school dropout who died in hospital six days later. The report claimed the immolation was an expression of the gang's brutality. The dead boy's father, one Boniface Chipendo, was refusing to have anything to do with his son's corpse.

The newspaper stated the crimes were committed on 29 November. This was 11 December. It boggled the Senator why the story took long to make the news and why the police hadn't launched a manhunt based on the individual descriptions of the gangsters given by the compound dwellers. She supposed the abduction irked many non-governmental organisations in the country concerned with children's rights and their welfare, and as was their norm, could be

formulating street demonstrations against the police, the Police Commissioner and the Minister of Home Affairs.

At least the story had the potential for political gain for her if reporters captured her sympathising with the family of the kidnapped child and paying condolences to the bereaved one. On behalf of the Party, she would disparage crime and the Opposition in the same vein. She would also ooze vitriol against the West and the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe. The President would pat her for the effort, which would go a long way in assuring her position and stature in the Party.

She feared it was possible the boy's parents wouldn't see him alive again. Her understanding of child abductions was simple: kidnapped children never returned in most cases, especially in Europe and America where paedophiles and psychopaths were on the loose. However, it was rather rare to hear of child abductions in Africa except in cases where young albinos were kidnapped on the orders of traditional diviners for their blood and private parts allegedly for use in business charms.

Though Peza's abduction saddened her there just was nothing she could do about it as a Senator except to wait for the apprehension of the criminals and make sure she appeared at the courts on their initial remand. She was the Senator for Sanyati, Kadoma and Mhondoro. Sakis Mine was within her constituency. Lounging in a sofa, the story of the abduction faded in her head.

A clock on the mantle indicated it was a few minutes past 1 pm. Having rested enough and ridded herself of a benign flight sickness, Senator Lisa Gororo decided to take a bath, partly as an occupation to wind time, partly in readiness for Jasper's arrival. The chauffeur said Jasper had hoped to be back at the farm on the day of her arrival from London. But she felt it was silly of him to go crocodile catching when he knew she would return laden with fertility drugs and that her days fell between the tenth and the fifteenth.

She had taken her first tablet yesterday in London and the second one on arriving home. This day and the next would be her most fertile days. Jasper had to be home. Babies were one thing; she also needed his company. She missed his childish ideas and expressions.

She lit a cigarette. Taking her cellular phone with her, she left the lounge for the bathroom, removed her wig and began peeling her clothes before a full-length mirror. With the wig and all her clothes and underwear hanging on hooks, she took an honest look at herself and shook her head. She was a bundle of animated wrinkles and folds. Her sprouting pubic hair was snowy. She focused on her face. Her head was nearly bald, a result of traction alopecia arising from years of wearing tight extensions and braids. Without a wig, she appeared like a terrestrial alien. If she were Jasper, she would not look at a woman like her twice without vomiting. She laughed aloud, the adage money bought anything ringing a bell in her head.

Then she looked at the glowing cigarette and smiled. When she smoked in public, people were tantalised. It gave her an air of sophistication; very few mainstream African women smoked. Female smokers symbolised freedom and economic empowerment. Total black empowerment was the last thrust of her lacklustre Party.

The Senator was soon lying in a foam bath, her mobile phone within sight and reach. Wherever Jasper was, she was sure he was dying to let her know he was on his way home. She watched smoke curling from her mouth and cigarette to the roof, and thought of how wrong she had been initially, when she first saw Jasper and adjudged him young, still budding in the loins and inexperienced in matters sexual. At sixty-one one when she met him, she had long ruled out blissful feelings in her shrivelled body. She had been wrong. On the first encounter by the fireplace, she bit her lips with exhilaration from the rush of blood to desolate places in her body.

Her mobile phone rang, disturbing her reverie. She listened and heard its inbuilt pdf-reader announcing Jasper was calling. She

reached for it and answered. "Hi, Rambo. I'm home. Where're you, dear? Tell me you're by the gate."

"I need your help, Lisa." His voice came in a whisper. "I've just escaped death—"

"Don't turn me into a moron with your stupid crocodile business," she exploded. "Come home this minute, Jasper! You know the date... and you know I'm waiting for you!"

"I can't come to Van Praaah now—"

"Listen to me good, Jasper!" she yelled, interjecting. "If you're not home within the hour, you'll find all your belongings by the gate! Don't bother to come in! I think I make myself clear!"

"For Christ's sake, listen—"

"I mean what I've just said!" She terminated the call and sneered. "This rural boy treats me like a village woman," she hissed to herself. "If he wants to be funny now after two years of squandering my money and seeing my nakedness, I can have him liquidated. My brother is a brigadier. Only one phone call and the boy is history." She had barely put down the phone when it rang and read Jasper's name again. She brought it to her ear and erupted, "There're chances you're seeing a girl and having fun! I'm not in the mood for kindergarten excuses! What's it?"

"There's an ugly situation here."

"What situation? Come home, boy!"

"I'm hiding in a groove outside Patchway Mine. I'm severely injured and need your help. Please don't ask me too many questions. I don't have enough airtime."

She laughed. "That's lame, my boy. Are you telling me you're in the middle of running battles with crocodiles?"

"No. A weird man and his team captured me. It's a long story, Lisa."

"I'm not into stories. I'm a politician not a publishing editor."

"Hey, listen to me, please. It's about a boy a gang abducted about a fortnight ago. The boy—"

“Spare me that trash. Have you joined the police? Are you a vigilante?”

“No. In the name of God, please listen. I told you about my sister, do you remember? I told you about Matipa—”

“You’re panting, Jasper. You’re on top of a lousy ghetto girl.”

“I beg you to listen. I don’t mention God atop a girl.”

Indeed, it was unlike him to mention God. He talked about a kidnapping victim and she had just read about another. “I’ll hazard and believe you. Tell me the story.”

“My sister’s son... my nephew... was kidnapped on 29 November. Her husband and I caught up with the abductors in the bush behind Patchway. They beat me and left me for dead. As...as I’m talking to you, my brother-in-law is at their mercy... They’re butchering him.”

He couldn’t be fabricating. His call was a plea for help.

“I’m severely wounded and bleeding,” he panted. “I can pass out any moment.”

Senator Lisa Gororo advised him to hang on to life. She was in the middle of taking as many details as possible from him when the connection went dead. Earlier he had cited inadequate airtime. She called him. His phone rang once and he answered. He was very thankful for her call. Shortly, she ended the call and walked out of the en suite bathroom wrapped in a towel. She was frantic. Water dripped from her body and messed the floor. She sat on a bureau in her bedroom and transferred onto a notepad what Jasper had just told her.

Then she dialled her brother, the written page of the notepad in her hands. “Hello, my good brother,” she said with urgency.

“Hello, my good sister,” her brother’s voice came, strong and authoritative. “How was your London trip?”

“Can we talk about the trip afterwards, please?”

“No. We talk about the trip now because I want to know what you brought your brother.”

“I need your help. You’re the only one who can help me.”

“What has happened, my good sister?”

“I don’t know how to say it.”

“Just say it, Senator.”

“Someone very close to me despite your disapproval is in a very bad situation.”

“What has Jasper gotten into?”

“Brigadier,” she began solicitously, “Perhaps you’ve read in the paper about a boy kidnapped from a gold mine some two weeks ago.” She explained the story to her brother as Jasper had done to her, emphasising the criminals wounded him critically and he was hiding in a groove in Patchway. “I suppose a bit of military intervention is needed,” she said finally.

“This is a matter for the police, Senator.”

“I know, Brigadier. I want Jasper rescued from that place. Despatch some men as a favour to your only sister.”

“My superiors won’t be amused, Senator. Members of the brigade are not to be used in personal matters.”

“You’re my last hope, Douglas. I’m begging you.” She heard him sigh.

“There’re stringent procedures to be followed. If I act outside them my actions can be interpreted as treasonous.”

“I’m banking on you, Brigadier. I wish you could understand what Jasper means to me.”

“You give me no option,” the brigadier’s voice came, yielding reluctantly. “I’m despatching a stick to the area immediately. I hope HQ won’t know about it.”

“What’s a stick, Brigadier?”

“Nine specialised soldiers with a singular command.”

“I’ve no words to thank you.”

“But bear in mind these men are trained to kill, not to make arrests,” he warned. “Depending on the situation, they’ll either kill or handover the criminals or their corpses to Patchway Police Station.”

“Who cares about heartless criminals?”

“The operation will take less than two hours beginning now.”

“What do I do in the meantime?”

“Go to the military hospital at Suri-Suri Airbase. An army doctor will receive you. If Jasper is alive, my men will bring him to you there.”

Chapter 28

Binga steeled himself against showing his repulsion of what was cooking in a used five-litre tin of paint on a log fire around which he, Bomani and one of his men sat. On all fours, the man fanned and blew the fire religiously, an assignment his master gave him.

Flames licked the bottom and sides of the smoke-blackened tin that had obviously cooked many strange dishes like the black hen cooking in it. Loose feathers moved in endless circles on the seething water.

The hen met its death by strangulation in the hands of Bomani. It wasn't cut or dressed in any way and had all its feathers. Binga couldn't believe he penetrated the fowl to Bomani's satisfaction. The act was an affront to his self-esteem. When he withdrew, Bomani grabbed the hen and twisted its neck. The fire had already been prepared. The brute placed the fowl in the tin and sat by the fire. For Peza he had done it, Binga kept reminding himself quietly as he endured the pain in his wounds.

Now around the fire they sat in silence, the three of them, Bomani and his henchman's eyes on the chicken. Binga shied from looking at the cooking fowl with his seed inside it. They had been sitting around the fire for fifteen minutes now, he estimated, wondering if Bomani and his men would eat the adulterated chicken. Though he feigned relaxation, as if he had become of similar mind with his captors, he worried about Jasper. Three of Bomani's men had gone searching in the direction the crocodile catcher had come from.

"Your brother-in-law is a cat," Bomani said deadpan. "He's several lives."

Binga didn't know what to say. He grinned sheepishly.

“After this,” he pointed at the chicken, “you’ll become a member of Bomani’s family and a close confidante. For starters, you and Bomani’ll change operational policy. We’ll behead those who fall in our hands to protect our backs. Assumptions can prove dangerous.”

Binga nodded.

“It’s well cooked now,” Bomani said to the man minding the fire. “Set the tin on the ground and throw away the water.” He turned to Binga. “Whether your brother-in-law is found or isn’t, we shall leave this place tonight.”

The man set the tin on the ground and tipped it carefully, spewing boiling water and loose feathers.

“We’ll take the boy back to his mother,” Bomani continued. “As a family, it’s our collective responsibility to handover the boy. If you’re kind enough you’ll let Bomani’s men sleep with your wife and give her gifts. They haven’t touched women in a long time. Then we’ll begin our trek to Chiadzwa through gold claims and farmhouses.”

Binga nodded understanding.

“By the time we reach our destination about four hundred kilometres away in a straight line, we shall be rich but not rich enough to part ways. The long march shall be your induction.” He looked up and cocked an ear as if he had heard something, and then continued, “Don’t despair, you’ll have occasion to sleep with the wives of these men and give them gifts.”

Binga nodded again. “When do you free the boy?”

“After we partake,” Bomani pointed at the chicken steaming in the tin.

Binga and Bomani then sat quietly. The henchman put out the fire, log by log.

A hum, distance and growing rapidly, caught their attention. All of them turned and scanned the clouds eastwards. At first, Binga saw nothing but shifting clouds. The noise continued to grow. After some

seconds, he saw three dark dots, which turned out to be military helicopters flying abreast.

He estimated they were about two hundred metres apart and flying at an altitude of one hundred metres. The low altitude and the distance between them meant one thing: the planes were on a surveillance mission. The helicopters whizzed above them, their noise deafening. Binga noticed two of the helicopters were Hawks, helicopter gunships flanking a personnel carrier with a large white cross on its belly. The helicopters turned left in a wide arch and disappeared in the distance. Their drone faded and died.

“What do you think of the war birds, Binga?” Bomani asked; gazing in the direction the planes had vanished.

“I don’t know,” he said and touched his hurting jaw. “It’s difficult to think straight under the circumstances.”

“Bomani thinks the Air Force is here to complement the security of the police,” Bomani deduced. “Many tourists have arrived. Many more are yet to arrive. The government wants to prove Zimbabwe is a safe tourist destination and she can go the extra mile to protect the foreigners.”

Binga nodded.

The drone came again from the initial direction. Once again, the helicopters appeared as specs against merry tropical clouds in the eastern sky.

“Bomani doesn’t like the look of this,” Bomani commented, his eyes on the growing dots. “A double flypast of helicopters when down here there’s no honour-mongering president on a dais. Do you still suppose all is well, Binga?”

“I’m worried about my son; otherwise all is well, boss.”

“Cover the warren with fresh leaves and twigs,” Bomani said to his henchman putting out the logs. “We don’t want the airmen to see what doesn’t concern them.” He turned to Binga. “When the helicopters leave the area pick your son. Something tells Bomani we must leave Patchway for Sakis Mine.”

The helicopters flew over them again, but they were ascending swiftly.

Armed with a machete, the man left in the direction of the coop imprisoning Peza. A few paces from them, he cut several leafy twigs from shrubs on the edge of the clearing, and held them in the crook of his arm. A wary eye on the airborne threesome, he continued to swing the machete until the cluster of twigs in his arm was like a gigantic banquet of inelegant flowers. By the time he stepped on the obscured footpath leading to the warren, he was sweating and burdened with the twigs. He ran out of sight towards Peza.

“When they fly over us again,” Bomani said, “we should look up and smile at the birds. You can smile and wave at them, Binga.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” Binga stared at the helicopters vanishing with altitude above them. From war experience, he knew that when helicopters suddenly ascended usually a deplaning would happen. He dismissed the thought. The airborne soldiers could be on a training routine.

Bomani removed the boiled chicken and broke it into seven portions with his hands. He placed five in the tin, retained one and handed one to Binga. “God gave man everything except time. We must partake now and put the ritual behind us.” He began eating, munching like a pig.

Binga looked at the chunk of chicken in his hand, and fought back nausea.

“Eat now,” the brute ordered. “Choppers are hovering; you can’t wait for the others.”

The ex-commando nodded endlessly, an attempt to delay eating the portion. He watched his captor chomping his piece of chicken. Binga retched drily.

Bomani smiled derisively. “Eat that piece of chicken or Bomani’ll be angry with you and your son. You won’t like it when he loses his temper.”

Binga brought the chunk to his mouth. He was about to take a bite when an occurrence in the western sky about a kilometre from them caught his attention, tempting Bomani to look in the direction. The helicopters were out of sight but about a dozen paratroopers were descending with parachutes. Both men stood up, bewildered by the development.

Between them and the airborne troopers, Jasper juttred from a bush and began waving frantically at the soldiers. The henchman returned from the warren, the machete still in his hands. The parachutists also stole his attention. Binga dropped the piece of chicken on the ground.

Bomani whistled once, shrilly, and pointed at Jasper. "Kill him!" he shouted.

From an old westward cork tree, about fifty metres from them, an AK 47 rifle cried disjointedly. Binga saw muzzle sparks in the tree's shadowy boughs. From experience, he knew the gunner had half-emptied his magazine. On the ground, Jasper danced involuntarily and fell out of sight in the bush. From surrounding bushes, scores of masked dancers and shirtless drummers took to their heels in several directions except the source of the gunfire. Binga deduced the military police had learnt from Matipa where he was and had collaborated with the Air Force's Parachute Regiment to bring him to book.

"Everyone is running," Bomani said. "We run too." He looked at his henchman. "Binga is weak. Carry the boy. We're leaving for Chiadzwa. The gunner will keep them occupied as we escape." He improvised a megaphone with his hands and spoke to the gunner. "Shoot the parachutes! We meet in Chiadzwa!"

The gunner opened fire again; two volleys in quick succession. Two parachutes deflated and two paratroopers tumbled into the thickets. Bomani ran to their hovels as Binga and the henchman dashed to the warren. Peza sat slumped and intricately bound. The boy looked up and quickly dropped his head. Peza didn't recognise

him. Looking at his son in bondage exacerbated the guilt he felt over his family and the people killed since Bomani visited the mine.

The fact that the animal had brutalised him, shaven him bald and axed incisions in his head, fractured Binga's self-esteem. This day, 11 December, the day he prostrated before a fellow man to avoid death, was damned. His wife, if he made it back to Sakis Mine, would disparage and regard him as a lesser man. He wondered whether he would ever walk tall at the mine. What soured and disoriented him the most were the incisions stuffed with unknown juju. What influence would the juju have on his being and the people around him?

Using the machete, the man broke the bark straps securing the warren and sat the weapon down. Both men tore the cage apart and removed the pole between the boy's knees and elbows. When the henchman bent to pick Peza, Binga found an opening he wanted and picked the machete. Standing beside the unsuspecting man, he gripped the hilt with both hands and swung the machete at his exposed neck.

He had hoped the machete would behead him, but the blade was too blunt to sever the vertebrae column. However, the impact was fatal. Though the bones weren't completely broken, arteries, cartilages and ligaments were. The man reflexively dived and slumped besides Peza. Blood splashed on the lethargic boy. The man neither cried nor issued any eyebrow raising noise, and the drone of the helicopters drowned every sound. Binga picked his son and placed him on his left shoulder. The boy was almost weightless from torture and starvation. Peza hardly opened his eyes.

Now armed with the machete, his son on his shoulder, Binga was about to flee in the opposite direction to where Bomani was when he heard the footsteps of running men and the sound of an approaching vehicle. He peered eastwards through gaps in the coppice and saw the three men Bomani had sent to Jasper's Land Rover. An all-terrain armoured military vehicle was chasing them over boulders and

shrubs. The men were pointing at the groove. One thing was clear: the men had been disarmed of their machetes and were leading the military vehicle to them.

The gunner fired at the vehicle. The bullets whizzed over and through the thicket and ricocheted on the trees and the armoured vehicle. When the gunner's fire died, the vehicle came to an abrupt stop. Its rear door flung open. Armed soldiers jumped from its back and ran in different directions in military formation. Binga counted eight soldiers; including the driver, the men were a military stick. They formed a military line about a hundred metres in the east, the thicket their target. His expert guess was Bomani's gunner was reloading; he wouldn't have held fire for the stick to establish itself against him.

In the west, the paratroopers were landing and taking positions. The helicopter with the white cross appeared from the same direction and landed amid swirling plumes near the bush in which Jasper lay. Binga could tell from its size and two windows on either side of the aircraft that it was a British Bell 412; a non-combative aircraft mainly used for transportation and evacuation. The other two helicopters, gunships, flew dangerously low, circling the area in a wide radius, their doors wide open and mounted machineguns protruding, camouflaged soldiers in helmets behind the weapons.

Had it been dark, Binga thought he could've had some chances of escaping with his son. The military net was tight and closing. Was Bomani seeing all this and what was he thinking? Intent on settling his score with his archrival before the soldiers got to them, Binga put his son down. Despite himself, his heart pounded as he retraced his footprints to the area in the groove where Bomani had vanished. He hid the hand with the machete behind him.

The ex-commando found Bomani standing amid the three metal trunks. One was open, its contents *Gule Wamkulu* paraphernalia. Bomani's back was to Binga and he was tying a zoomorphic mask around his head. It was obvious the man was preparing to make a

smart escape as a genuine *nyan* practitioner. The combined noise of the vehicle and the helicopters muffled Binga's advent.

He was three paces from his archenemy when Bomani turned, the mask covering his face. The wooden masquerade was spooky and monstrous. Binga closed the gap, raising the machete. Bomani stepped back, reproachfully waving a hand. Binga took the opportunity as god-given. He feigned kicking the brute in the right ribs. When Bomani brought his guard down, Binga swung the machete at an angle. The blade chipped off the mask's chin and homed squarely below his left ear, the force thrusting the masked man into a thorny bush. Bomani winced in agony. His limbs jerked.

Knowing he had to finish off his enemy to thwart the possibility of the brute hunting for him again; Binga stooped over the wriggling man and aimed the other side of his head now exposed. Because he shook with rage, the blade connected between the neck and the shoulder, breaking the collarbone and sinking into him. Bomani turned inertly and lay on his face.

The machete descended several times on the back of his head and neck. Binga only stopped when he exposed Bomani's vertebrae. He sighed and tried to establish if his enemy was dead. Bomani moved. Was it an involuntary twitch of muscles? By some chance, Bomani could still be alive. Binga sank the machete into his ribcage and left it in him.

If time allowed, he would've beheaded Bomani Kumanda to take his head back to Sakis Mine as a trophy and statement to everyone, of the fighter and vigilante in him. Squatting, he quickly went through Bomani's right hip pocket and retrieved Jasper's one thousand five hundred dollars. From the left pocket, he fished a thinner roll of money, which he would count later. In the same pocket was a charm in the form of a hand-sewn miniature pillow. Binga threw the charm away and pocketed the money. Time was of the essence or he would end up in the High Court facing an aggravated murder charge.

He rose and began crouching to where he left his son. Halfway he dropped to the ground and had to crawl because the gunner resumed fire from the cork tree. He was shooting at the stick of infantry soldiers to the east, keeping them at bay. Binga was in the line of fire. The soldiers didn't return fire until a rifle in the east cried once. Binga paused, turned and looked over the canopy of the coppice. The gunner dropped his AK 47 and tumbled from the tree. Binga knew there was a first-grade sharpshooter in the stick. He also knew that since the soldiers had eliminated their only obstacle, they were now quickly closing in on the groove for their objective.

It was imperative he moved with speed too. The hovering aircraft were circling at tree level and closing in. More masked dancers and their drummers panicked and bounded from surrounding clusters of trees and thickets. A few raised their hands in surrender, while the majority, sceptics, kept running for their lives. On the behest of politicians, uniformed forces, mostly infantry soldiers, had often brutalised members of the public.

A teenage couple in underwear ran into the clearing from nowhere, startling Binga. On seeing the fresh and dry blood on him, they fled towards Boman's body, only to stand stork-still before fleeing through an intricate matrix of thorny twigs.

While the helter-skelter occupied both the ground and airborne soldiers, Binga ran to Peza and lifted him. As before, he placed him on his left shoulder and carried him to the clearing. Escaping the outright military net was an impossible feat. He had to lie low until the soldiers left. Crossing the makeshift arena in a dash, he ran past the tree from which the gang had hung Jasper upside-down and exited the other side of the groove fraught with dangerous shafts. Making for the nearest one, shifting Peza until he carried him like a baby on his back, he knew there was no other option but to descend.

At the shaft, a strong stench greeted him. The shaft was hazardously inclined and primitive. There was neither a rope nor a ladder into the disused shaft. However, there were steps and

footholds in its reclining floor. Daylight lit the entrance and the first few steps and footholds. The depths were treacherously dark and he had neither torch nor weapon.

One hand securing his son on his back, the other groping the wall, he descended with Peza. The echo of his footsteps assured him of tunnels and vaults underground. The stench grew stronger with every step he took. The odour warned him lives had been lost in the depths, but Binga Jochoma dared the darkness, the underground was home.

Chapter 29

Matipa was restless. Having spent the night alone and every minute expectant of hearing the sound of the Land Rover approaching, she had covered herself with a blanket and fallen asleep on a sofa. She slept fretfully, dreaming of the two returning and waking up thinking a car, a knock or footsteps had roused her.

Daybreak found her on the sofa. She forced herself to do household chores, but always returned to sit on the sofa facing outside. The door was wide open and she had a good view of the people approaching or leaving the compound.

Now it was about 9 am on 12 December and it was beginning to dawn on her that her husband and brother wouldn't return. Self-condemnation ruled summarily she had heartlessly sacrificed them. How could two men confront a gang that had subdued an entire compound? Quietly she mourned her brother. If he were dead, then he died young and childless; therefore he died bitter and his spirit would torment her all the days of her life.

Her mind went back to the recollection of the dream of the night of 24 November when she dreamt of her husband carrying Peza on his back as he returned home exhausted and struggling to walk, the expression on his face paradoxical and boggling. On the same face, she had read both jubilation and lamentation. Peza was wide-eyed and speechless. Twelve floribunda blooms were in her husband's head. A thirteenth bloom, numerically satanic, was in the centre of his head. Then there was the red bandanna around his neck in a Boy Scout fashion. The thirteen blooms and the bandanna had a striking match.

Why had she looked for divinity in an earthly man? That was her error, she could see now. She had to see everything about her husband in a mundane light. Such a perspective was sensible and

befitting to a man who lied inexorably to her throughout the seven years of their marriage. Their son had grown up knowing him by a bogus name.

The dream had baffled her, it still did. What were twelve symbols doing in the head of a prosaic man? The number thirteen continued to unsettle her. As before, she elected to occupy herself with the biblical denotations associated with the twelve ornamental blooms around his head. Again, despite herself, she tended to think religiously. She recalled the twelve tribes of Israel; Jacob's begetting of twelve patriarchs; Solomon's baptismal font, the molten sea that stood upon twelve oxen; the Levite at Gibeah who cut his abused concubine, together with her bones, into twelve parts; the twelve stones Prophet Elijah picked; the Messiah's twelve disciples; the twelve heavenly gates manned by twelve angels.

What did the red bandanna signify? Where was he coming from when she saw him in the distance? Why was he carrying Peza on his back, and why was his countenance a contradiction? In an about-turn, she scorned herself for assuming the bandanna and the blooms were supposed to signify something. The dream was just weird, that was all. She was tired of speculating. Her husband, accompanied by Jasper, left for Patchway Mine yesterday to confront a demon. There was no way a confrontation would bring romance to their marriage.

Matipa knew she had to put a time limit to her waiting. If by midday the two hadn't returned, she would inform the mill manager and ask him to call the police so that they could send details to Patchway Mine for the retrieval of their bodies for a proper burial. As she relived all the horror, she realised her husband had become nameless in her mind. For years, she had known him as Akar Muja. Suddenly he was Binga Jochoma and admitting it. Suddenly he was a married man and she was a mistress. She couldn't accept it.

As she sat in the lounge, curiosity and fear enveloped her. She refrained from facing the possibility Akar and Jasper were dead, her waking thought that day. Idling in the sitting room wouldn't address

her worry. She stepped outside, locked the house and started to the office. Ivy would avail her cell phone again or give her access to the landline and she would call her brother.

Her head bowed and her back hunched, she walked. From the corners of her eyes, she saw some compound dwellers staring at her, some mournful, some with ridicule and others with contempt. She was nonchalant. On passing the mill, guilt filled her; the ore grinder hadn't worked since the day Bomani Kumanda kidnapped her son. Electing not to worry about the counter-production of her presence and her husband's absence at the mine, she tried to figure out if Jasper wasn't a sacrificial ram in the matter, and concluded she had thoughtlessly involved him.

As though she had ambled in a miasma of narcosis, Matipa found herself before Ivy in the reception.

"Have you come to condemn my pastor again?" Ivy was in a sweater exposing the cleavage of her bosom.

"I wish to make a call."

"Your husband should buy you a cell phone."

"When my husband stops visiting people like you behind my back he'll buy me one."

"What the *hell* are you suggesting, Mrs Muja? You think I'm dating your husband?"

"Can I make a call, please?"

Ivy sighed. "You're very rude, Mrs Muja."

"No. I'm frank."

A tense moment passed.

"If Mr GK finds you on the landline I'm fired." Ivy said gesturing towards the mill manager's closed door. She fumbled in her handbag, took out her cell phone, pressed a button on it and almost slammed it on the desk. "Use a minute and leave."

Matipa picked the cell phone and poked Jasper's number, discovering in the process that the receptionist had switched the gadget to loudspeaker mode. A continuous beep sounded and an

automated voice followed: *The number you've dialled is not available now. Please, try later.*

"Can I tell you something, Mrs Muja?"

"You're free."

"I met a man who'll marry me."

"As long as it isn't my husband I'm happy for you."

Ivy laughed and clapped her hands once, sarcastically. "You've a high opinion of your husband, I'm sorry to say. He's ordinary and probably criminal."

"Stop degrading my husband. Tell me about your *extraordinary* prince and saint."

"I think you fabricated things about my pastor because you hated me. You hated me because you thought I could snatch your husband."

"You haven't said a thing about your British knight." Matipa said; redialling Jasper's number. The automated message came again.

Ivy's face beamed. "I met him two days ago at the Ranch Motel. He's an American sculptor here to tour the Victoria Falls for inspiration. He'll marry me."

"And you met him two days ago at a motel?"

"Love at first sight is a reality. I've become the air Nicolson breathes and the blood in his veins. He calls me every hour and treats me like royalty. I've been praying for a man of his calibre."

"Don't trust foreigners." Matipa grinned, placing the cell phone on the desk.

"When you pray for bread, the Lord won't give you a scorpion."

"Thank you and good day, Ivy." Matipa walked out of the reception, again slipping into the dazed state that once hindered her from seeing and appreciating the floribundas in the yard.

Leaving the door ajar, she sat in the same position in her sitting room. Soon after, the blooms dream appeared to be materialising. A man who looked like her husband appeared in her view carrying a grown child on his back. He was staggering. She narrowed her eyes,

but he was still too distant to make out his features. His progress was slow and painful.

People came out of their huts and houses to watch him in awe and disgust. After some time, she saw that his head was bald and his clothes were torn. It couldn't be her husband. Jasper and her husband had left by car; they'd return by one. The man walked towards her. Many things were familiar about him. Matipa rose from the sofa and crossed to the door. She stood framed in the doorway, her bewilderment mounting.

Her husband had passed the late Emedhi's clusters of huts when she recognised him and Peza frighteningly slouched and lifeless on his father's back. Was the boy asleep or sick? She yelled in joy and fear and ran towards them. Was her husband bringing home a dead body for the sake of a decent burial? From the awe and disgust on the people's faces, sensibly the boy was dead. Midway, her steps floundered drunkenly. She sank to the ground and began to wail. No one came to her. As her husband shuffled past her, she looked at him closely and fell silent.

His tattered clothes were dirty and bloody. She saw familiar cuts in his head. Remegio had endured the same cuts after the gang set him on fire. It appeared juju and coagulating blood covered the wounds. Matipa's right hand came to rest on her bosom. Relief poured on her when she set her eyes on Peza, though he was thinner and dirty, it appeared he was asleep. She picked herself from the ground and followed them into the house. He reeked of kerosene, which pervaded the lounge.

"I've brought *your* son," Binga said, standing dejectedly in the centre of the room and facing a wall.

She stood beside him and scrutinised the cuts in his head without touching him. "What happened to you? Where's Jasper?"

"You said I should bring Peza at any cost. Here's *your* child. Take him."

"Where's Jasper? Please tell me."

"I don't know. He wasn't part of the equation."

"But you left with him," she pleaded.

He frowned and sighed in anger. "He was beaten and left for dead hanging from a tree." He sighed again. "Then he was shot. I walked through farmlands and forests all the way from Patchway. No public transport or motorist could give me a lift in this state without taking me to a police station. I must rest, Matipa. Take *your* child."

"What did they do to the boy? Is he alright?"

"He'll tell you when he wakes up. Bomani is dead. You don't need to know what happened to him."

She stood before him, searching his eyes. "What do we do now?"

He turned his head and looked away. "What do you mean by *we*? There's no longer *us*."

"Is that you speaking?"

"You ceased to be my wife when you henpecked me into going to Patchway. You surpass all women in cruelty. You knowingly sent me to my possible death. Now take *your* son. I must leave immediately before the police or the military come for me." He turned the child to her.

She couldn't move. Her mind was numbing. The smell of kerosene on him evoked images of Remegio aflame.

"If you don't take *your* son I'll leave with him. You won't see him again."

Matipa noticed the door was ajar and astonished people were gathering outside. Theirs was now a house of spectacular disturbances. She went to the door, closed and latched it. She was sobbing and couldn't turn from the door to face him.

"Don't cry, Matipa. You're a remarkable woman. A good woman needs a good husband. God knows I'm not a good husband. Find yourself a man with a heart. I wish you and *your* son happiness."

She heard him shuffle to the bedroom. A crackle of springs testified he had placed the sleeping boy on the bed. No, she couldn't

afford to lose him, not after seven years of marriage. Yet it was beneath her to show him her desperation for him.

What's God's wish in the whole matter? Is He for or against divorce? She was his mistress, she reminded herself. *Is God for or against polygamy?* The answers required a thorough search of the scriptures, and there was no time for that. Not when the wardrobe doors had creaked open and her husband was removing his clothes from the unit. She wiped her tears and followed him into the bedroom. Indeed Peza lay on the bed and her husband was taking a shirt from the wardrobe. Already he had placed a pair of trousers beside their son. The cuts in his head scared her.

"We must talk," she said despite herself.

He placed the shirt on the bed. She noticed he was avoiding looking at her. Suddenly he grabbed the shoulders of the token of a shirt on him and ripped it off. Buttons flew in all directions. He did the same to his bloodied trousers. When he glanced at her, he caught her staring at the blood on his underwear. "For you and Peza I penetrated a hen."

Her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

"Cut that astonished look," he intoned. "What were you expecting? Bomani boiled and ate the hen." He removed the stained underpants and stared at her.

She went to the wardrobe, pulled open a drawer and gave him clean underwear. "Will you take a bath?"

"Worry about *your* son." He gestured at Peza on the bed. "Hunger and fatigue threaten his life. Make him thin porridge and prepare to take him to a doctor." Picking the soiled trousers on the floor, he took out a bundle of money from a back pocket, and held it out to her. "He'll need to be examined and treated by a doctor. You also need to start a new life. That's one thousand and five hundred dollars."

She gawked at the money and looked at him. Seconds passed. Her eyes roamed his nude body fraught with bruises, swellings and

razor-like lacerations. His nose looked broken and blood had dried in the nostrils. There were cuts above his eyes. His lips were broken. He gave her the impression of someone thoroughly punched and booted before running across spirals of a hurricane fence. More tears dammed in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks.

He placed the money on the bed. As he was wearing the underpants she gave him, he saw a small black feather stuck in his pubic hair. For a while, he stared at it, but knocked it off with a finger and pulled up the undergarment. He began wearing the trousers he placed on the bed. "Find yourself a gentleman. We don't deserve each other. I'm going away."

"Are you going to your real wife in Bulawayo?"

"I don't love Nomathemba. She's curd spat from a brothel."

Her tears abated. He was shirtless and buckling his trousers when she stepped forward and placed her hand on the bruises on his chest.

He looked at her hand strangely as though it bore a contagious disease. "What's this now, Matipa... romance in the middle of a divorce?"

She looked him squarely in the eyes. For seven years, she had loved him with all her heart. For seven years, she had thought of him every second of the day. In her heart, she had engrained his name for life. "Do you love me, Akar?"

He looked away. "Call me Binga. That's my real name."

"Look at me and tell me the truth. Do you love me?"

His brow puckered. He looked boringly into her eyes. "I'm a dangerous man, Matipa. I've killed many people."

"That's besides the question. Do *you* love me?"

He grinned, a wordless expression of the folly of her question.

"Answer me, Binga Jochoma."

"I've maimed and killed people because of my love for *you* and Peza. Indeed that was mean and cynical of me, but it was a route towards the expression of my love."

"But you had a job here."

“My employment here was just a façade. The State trained and programmed me to kill. A man survives using what’s on his disposal. Blame it on the government.”

“You had a steady job and earned more than most civil servants in the country. When you provided for us, I was proud of you, but it didn’t cement our marriage because it was already cemented.” She shrugged. “Why do people fall in love and marry?”

“*You* tell me, Matipa. Why did *you* marry me?”

“No. *You* tell me. Why’re we a family? Why have we lived together all these years?” She put her arms around his waist and placed her face on his chest. Her tears soaked into his bruises and cuts.

“I’ll be honest.” He started. “I don’t hate you. Actually, I give you credit for keeping one of my feet in a divine realm while I kept the other in Hell. It gave me balance. When I walk out the door, I’ll place both feet in Hell.”

“Don’t talk like that. I don’t want you to go. Don’t walk away from me.”

“There’s unknown juju in my head. I don’t know if I’m still myself or if I’m now a monster worse than Bomani. I don’t want to pounce on you or Peza someday.”

She looked into his eyes. “You must convert.” Her voice was solicitous. “You’re salvageable.”

“Some people are earmarked for Sheol. I’m one of them.”

Epilogue

Because Matipa prevailed on Binga Jochoma to acquire a gold claim and dig, he dug on her insistence on 21 March, thirteen weeks after he fled Sakis Mine. The controversial prophet specified neither where he had to dig nor the mineral.

There was a dimension of absurdity to it; though Matipa believed the prophet was satanic, she had faith in the prophecy and continued to hasten to the words of a lunatic possibly certified and institutionalised by now.

Crouched, he dug about seventy fathoms from the surface in a tunnel characteristically Germanic. Only in a tattered denim short trousers and worn out gumboots, he dug with a fanatical fervour, tediously burrowing into the end of the tunnel. It amazed him how mining tore clothing and the possibility of prosperity spurred him.

Unkempt hair now covered the incision scars in his scalp. He didn't want to think much about them or he would worry himself to death. No benefit came from pondering the breadth and depth of evil. As much as he did, he recalled Bomani's toothless smile, the brute pulverising him with clenched fists, the animal running in circles with him on his shoulder, the man ordering him to remove the charm on his body. The recollection triggered a shudder in him. With his eyes, he had seen the Devil, and with his hands, he had killed him. With the same hands, he was digging in pursuit of a prophecy.

Using a pick, shovel and a four-pound hammer, he dug desperately, attacking the underground granite rock like a prisoner working at gunpoint. For motivation, he imagined he was attacking Bomani Kumanda. At Sakis Mine, he had toiled for a pittance. This was his project, his gold mine. No one was going to supervise him to work his way to wealth.

The mine was an old gold claim in Ndieme, an insignificant peripheral village on the eastern border between Zimbabwe and

Mozambique. Mountainous and unassuming, the small village was a good place for a fugitive to lie low. If the paramilitary police got wind of him and came, he would slip with his family into Mozambique. The border was nothing besides an unmanned strip road less than three hundred metres from his claim-cum-homestead. Mostly ox-drawn Scotch carts used the road, one wheel in Mozambique and the other in Zimbabwe. Because neither country laid claim to the dirt road, it wasn't privy to systematic maintenance. It was so overgrown on both sides and fraught with holes and rock boulders that it was hardly definably as a road.

In Ndieme and the other villages beyond, it appeared he was the only one doing underground mining. Traditionally, only a handful of villagers panned for alluvial gold during the rainy season. The generality of the villagers were contented with the yields of their terraced banana and pineapple fields. Since alluvial gold was more eye-catching and less laborious to obtain, the mine Binga acquired had lain idle since 1939 until the day he started working on it in December.

The ex-commando knew nothing about the mine except what he gleaned from its extraction records archived at the Mining Commissioner General's offices in Harare. Records showed that a consortium of German tycoons had owned and run the mine between 1925 and 1939. The mandatory records stated that the yield per tonne of ore, recorded as eleven wheelbarrows, was more than eighty grams. Operations at the mine ceased just before the outbreak of the Second World War when the Germans returned to their motherland.

At the mining offices, an archivist warned him prospective Chinese and Canadian miners who drew samples from the mine's tunnels were discouraged by the yield-per-tonne results they got from reputable assaying laboratories. Binga went on to pay a deposit of three hundred dollars for the claim without conducting a preliminary sampling visit. He was on the run and he wanted a home. The old

mine was a remarkable place to hide and start life afresh. The Germans had called their gold venture Feuerschutzhelfer Mine, whatever that meant. Upon paying the deposit, he renamed it New Dawn Mine.

On 12 December, when he returned from Patchway Mine with Peza, he missed military arrest by a whisker; Matipa later told him. After a frank discussion with his wife, he stormed out cursing and scolding her and ran in the direction of the apostolic shrine. That was the last time the compound dwellers saw him. The impression was that he was at loggerheads with his wife.

The direction outsmarted his possible pursuers, the police and the paramilitary officers. The latter stormed into the compound ten minutes after he left. On a broad fell, he removed his shoes for a change of prints in case pursuers singled his shoeprint, and ran southwards towards the Harare-Bulawayo highway. Despite the aches in his body, fatigue and hunger, he ran. His freedom depended on his endurance. A private car took him to Bulawayo. On him was eight hundred dollars.

In the second capital city, he bought groceries worth a hundred dollars. A taxi took him to Nomathemba's house in Tshabalala Township. Looking forward to his wife nursing and rousing him from his pitiable state, he found the house locked. Neighbours told him they had last seen her on the sixth or seventh of December. The daring described the clothes they last saw her in as immoral. When he reflected, he figured that as Gillian frolicked for him on the evening of 7 December at The Bronte Garden Hotel in Harare, Nomathemba was possibly indulging in the same manner.

On the eighth, the following day, the day he disciplined an entire family, he recalled reading a gruesome report on a suspected murder for body parts. The report mentioned an earthen figurine. Though the schools had closed for the December holiday, her inexplicable absence didn't typify the schoolteacher. Logically the murdered woman had to be Nomathemba. Her recovered remains had to be

somewhere in a government morgue, but there was no time or need for confirmation. Binga safely concluded his legal wife was the mutilated woman in the suitcases by the incinerator. He slept at a lodge and left for Harare the next morning.

His next port of call was the Government Complex Building housing the offices of the Registrar of Mines and the Mining Commissioner General. He had enough money to pay for accommodation in another lodge and make a mandatory deposit for a standard gold claim measuring seventy by two hundred metres. Since he grew up in Chimanimani, he was familiar with all parts of the precipitous district and its natural resources. Lately, news-making Chiadzwa was the most famous part with its diamonds. The fields were along the Mutare-Birchenough Bridge highway. Yet to the east, across numerous valleys, rivers and interlocking mountains, was a low-key rural area with an old gold mine he had once sought to acquire. About one hundred and fifty kilometres stood between the diamond fields and the remote area.

On 14 December, when he looked at the records and paid for the claim, Peza was at Kadoma General Hospital. Jasper had had two blood transfusions in an Intensive Care Unit at Suri-Suri Airbase between Kadoma and Chegutu. *The Herald* carried a front-page report, which stated that an unknown assailant killed one Ivy Jessica Rowland, aged twenty-three, by surgical mutilation. A fellow tenant found her remains in her apartment in Westview, Kadoma.

Between the day Binga left Sakis Mine and mid-December, Matipa stayed with an ex-workmate in the farming town of Chegutu from which she visited their son and Jasper. She knew where to find Binga; he gave her the directions and the names of the buses to board on the lengthy journey to the edge of the country. After selling at give-away prices whatever was sellable in their house and giving the remainder to willing neighbours, she longed to follow her husband with Peza once the hospital discharged him. Whether he purchased

the Ndieme claim or failed, he had told her he would be in the far-flung village.

A day later, on 15 December, doctors gave Peza a clean bill of health. Peza's medical cards stated he had suffered from acute dehydration, hypothermia and fatigue. The lashing cuts on him healed completely, but in some places, especially the thighs and the back, were disconcerting scars. When the mother and her son disembarked in the City of Mutare to change buses, she took the opportunity to buy basic kitchenware, blankets and other necessities with part of the one thousand five hundred dollars Binga recovered from Bomani and the proceeds from their household property. On the evening of 17 December, Matipa and Peza arrived in Ndieme Village. A boy led them from a bus stop to the mine.

They found Binga grass-thatching two huts with the assistance of four villagers. The same men had helped him rehabilitate the site by cutting trees and shrubs, and setting fires to scare away pythons, cobras and other snakes. The men hoped once Binga had enough digging tools and wheelbarrows to send men underground, he would employ them. So far, he had tools only one man could use, and he was that man.

Once he found enough gold to buy tools for half a dozen men, they'd constitute his first shift. The labour of this shift would lead to the engaging of a second and third one. After some time he would buy piecemeal a one-stamp gold mill. From a single stamp, he would graduate to a two- or three-stamp mill. He wasn't going to visit a Sufi hermit at a confluence in a forest in Chipinge or kill an albino. His new motto was square-headedness in all things. Juju had seen him nearly killed at the hands of Bomani. At the back of his mind, he saw the folly of being square-headed when he was working in pursuance of a prophecy.

The newly erected huts of poles and clay were a few paces from the mine's old shaft. A rusty, weather-beaten and vandalised two-ton ball mill stood between the huts and the shaft. A specially mounted

tractor engine that had driven the mill, together with a three-metre steel spindle linking the engine to the gears of the mill, stood desolate on the premises. On the mouth of the shaft were remnants of a small headgear redundant beyond revival. The ball mill was now more of a nondescript vase than anything, stubborn trees, grass and shrubs jutted from its broken chamber. Near it lay a concrete slab where a stamp mill had stood. The construction measured about one and a half by three metres. Thick bolts protruding from strategic positions in the block indicated a large stamp mill once stood on it.

When Matipa arrived with Peza, he had listened to her nervously. He was scared of learning Bomani Kumanda had raised from the dead. A man of juju was capable of anything. Instead, Matipa told him a baloney of sad things:

“Stembile is in the Casualty Ward at the hospital. Doctors amputated one of her legs.”

“Shit!”

“Remegio’s body is still in the mortuary. Boniface Chipendo recovered.”

“I hope the blows taught him a lesson.”

“He’s moving around Sakis Mine with a spear big enough to put down an elephant.”

“Tell me about Jasper.”

Matipa bore bad news about Jasper, and immediately took him aside. Jasper was a disgrace they had to discuss out of the earshot of the thatching villagers. “Three doctors confirmed bullets permanently paralysed him from the waist downwards.”

“Shit!”

“On learning of the paralysis, Senator Gororo immediately accused Jasper of being overzealous and ditched him in the Intensive Care Unit. That was two days after the Patchway Mine shootout.”

“Shit!”

“On my next visit, military authorities told me Jasper’s admission at the hospital was improper because he wasn’t a member of the Air Force. They transferred him by road to Chegutu General Hospital.”

“Chegutu Hospital has nothing apart from beds and disgruntled staff.”

“The hospital further transferred him on the same day to Parerenyatwa in Harare. Our parents caught up with him the next day.”

“Did he make it?”

“Jasper is now a vegetable in Mungorwenyi Village.”

Binga looked at the ground, aware he ought to have handed the one thousand five hundred dollars to his brother-in-law, and said, “I’ll buy him a wheelchair once this project becomes viable.”

“God will bless you.”

“Nomathemba is dead,” he informed her without elaborating.

She held her bosom. “What happened?”

“You can obtain further information from *The Herald* of 8 December.”

The news stranded Matipa between celebrating and saying her condolences.

Binga walked back to the huts, leaving her standing where both of them had broken shocking news to the other. A week later, his wife planted a deciduous tree on the spot. The tree reminded him of Nomathemba. He urinated discreetly on it every night until it died.

Matipa joined the local Salvation Army that worshipped under a tree. The denomination had a single trumpet and two tambourines, all battered. Because the majority of its members didn’t have uniforms and shoes and the area was thorny, the congregants never marched through Ndieme and the surrounding villages. Due to her extensive knowledge of the Bible, the pastor tasked her to lead the women in their weekly meetings.

Binga was happy for her. At least the meetings and prayers kept her occupied. At the church, fellow congregants knew her as Mrs

Jennifer Pedegu, the wife of Obadiah Gedege Pedegu, his latest pseudonyms. In collaboration, they rechristened their son David—David Pedegu—and enrolled him for Grade 1 at Ndieme Primary School about a kilometre from the claim. Binga's security required a cooperative approach beyond the dictates of Christianity.

Being the proprietor and only worker at the mine didn't make his life enviable. Now by the light of a paraffin lamp Binga dug, stripped to the waist and sweating. He wasn't accumulating much gold ore. The greenstone seam was very thin and had a vanishing tendency. The area wasn't famous for gold but bananas and pineapples. Although he was in denial, it was indisputable that the advent of the Second World War hadn't ceased operations at the mine, but an absence of significant amounts of the precious metal itself.

Daily he spent endless hours underground. When he started, he had hoped to be richer than Mr Artaxerxes Korykos was. Now, after thirteen weeks, the hope was fading, and he was physically wasted. Hope was a good motivator, but sadly, it was incapable of putting food on the table and couldn't give him the personality of a notable in Matipa's eyes.

Ever since he started furthering the Germanic tunnel, he had only made enough money to feed his family. They all wore the same clothes they brought from Sakis Mine. They slept on the floor like desolate corpses and bought their groceries piecemeal from a string of sorrowful local shops. Eggs and sausages were conspicuously absent from their breakfasts. Often they took black tea. Rural milk was cheap but he couldn't afford it every day.

At the end of each toiling day, Matipa encouraged him with words. That God would reward his efforts. She said a proper livelihood was worth more than gold in God's eyes.

Binga was of the feeling he was digging his grave, and he was now a lesser man in his wife's eyes. He feared Matipa would lose focus and return to her people in Mungorwenyi Village, and her people would give her in marriage to another man.

The short-handled pick rose and fell nonstop for several minutes, shale accumulating at the foot of the vertical seam. He shovelled the chipped rock out of the way and picked the lamp to inspect his progress. The labour exposed a small part of the thin seam. Using the hammer and chisel, he knocked down ore, sparks flying from the greenstone. The effort yielded only about half a bucketful of low-grade ore. All his muscles hurt. He pitied himself.

Though the urge to abandon mining, re-arm and embark on the prowl in nearby Chiadzwa nagged him, he picked the digging tools and continued to break his back. His mettlesome axe was probably still in the coppice in Patchway, but he wasn't going back for it. The seam thinned further. He continued to attack the mass of rock on its sides. Suddenly the seam ended.

He grooved deeper into the rock, but no trace of the seam lay beyond. The same had happened in three other tunnels. Binga refuted a clear fact: the mine was an exhausted, nonviable venture. Holding the lamp to the face of the rock, he admitted to himself New Dawn Mine was a terminal dungeon. By agreeing to pick digging tools and dig, he saw that Jatropha, through his wife, had indirectly sentenced him to hard labour.

He was better off at Sakis. Under the circumstances, it would make sense to approach the Village Chief for a piece of tillage land. Had he committed the last thirteen weeks to peasant farming, at least he could've been expecting a harvest and assured of subsistence for his family. The area had enough rivers and rainfall. By harkening to Matipa's advice, he had been foolish, and he had no excuse for being foolish. Admittedly, he was foolish enough to marry a foolish wife. Matipa was a foolish Christian.

He sank to the floor and held his head. The ore was a negligible heap between his legs. The reason Feuerschutzhelfer Gold Mine had closed in 1939 was straightforward. The Germans had exhausted the gold. Yes, a decent and legal livelihood pleased Matipa and her God, but a man was entitled to his living. His wife's convictions had led

them to misery. His future bleak in his mind, he stared at the opposite wall a few inches from his face. He was failing to answer a hazy question in his head. If the former owners of the mine hadn't left hurriedly as evidenced by the absence of a gigantic stamp mill they dismantled, sold or took with them, why had they left the ball mill and its engine intact?

It appeared the Germans had intended to return, and couldn't because either the war devoured them or something stood in their way. The reason a large mill had stood on the mine was none other than the basis of its erection: there were vast amounts of the precious metal the foreigner miners anticipated to extract when they returned. The Germans couldn't have looked forward to returning to mine the low-grade ore. If this deduction was right, where was the gold?

Somewhere in the tunnels had to be a lucrative gold seam. In their operations, the professional miners were probably dubious and cunning enough to bypass it in order to waylay future miners. Binga was determined to locate it. He would systematically inspect every square inch of the underground walls. It was honourable to die searching for wealth than of resignation to poverty.

He noticed that a portion the size of a manhole in the wall before him had cracks in it, which was strange. The rest of the walls were solid rock. He guessed it was an exploratory boring the Germans refilled with rubble. It would be a good place to start. If the seam weren't here, he would've to look for similar cracks and open them.

Using the back of the chisel, he knocked on the fractured wall. Pieces of chipped rocks fell to the floor, exposing more loose ones jammed together. He gouged out the rocks one by one until he was crammed and boring in a hole on the side of the tunnel near the dead end. He worked like a machine, dislodging with the chisel individual rocks and throwing them in the tunnel. The re-boring progressed steadily in half-light; the lamp was behind him in the tunnel. His fingers hurt.

As he laboured, it became clear to him the boring hadn't been filled randomly with rubble, but there was a masonry to it for lasting stability. A premonition the burrow would demystify everything about the mine gave him vigour. Only after hitting a solid end would he stop to inspect for the hidden seam.

He had bored for about half a metre and a detracting mental voice was beginning to tell him to abandon the wild goose chase when the remaining loose rocks dramatically crumbled. A deep echo sounded. In the semi-darkness, a choky, steely air assaulted his nostrils and he recoiled, coughing and sneezing. The coughs came back to him as throaty echoes. Because his body almost jammed the boring, he moved backwards for the lamp. What was beyond the rocks that crumbled?

With a shaky hand, Binga picked the paraffin lamp, curiosity propelling him, and crawled back into the small boring. He noticed the splinters in its roof and sides, an indication the Germans had refilled a larger boring than he thought. When he looked ahead, he froze in awe: the light explored a large cavity. He was like a dwarf in the foyer of a huge igloo. A human skeleton on the floor took him aback. He crawled into a big cavernous space and hesitantly stood erect, the skeleton at his feet. It was a rock-walled hollow space with a floor approximately fifteen by ten metres. The height was about five metres.

He knelt and looked at the remains closely. The kinky hair on the floor around the skull convinced him he was looking at the relics of an indigenous African. Near one hand lay an intact rusty spear, near the other a machete. The primitive iron weapons and the absence of remnants of clothing meant the body was in the cavity for ritualistic purposes. Binga didn't need anyone to tell him he was looking at a "spiritual guard" the former owners of the mine killed and placed in the cavity to protect their investment. Stories abound in the country that some German miners were occultists who killed unsuspecting locals for that reason.

He straightened, the lamp dangling in his hand. To his right, he saw used wheelbarrows lined against the wall. They were about forty in five neat stacks stretching to the roof. In one corner lay a heap of worn out but usable picks and shovels whose apex was close to the roof. Lying against the wall to his left were long cumbersome materials. When he stepped closer to inspect them, he saw two kingposts, crossbars, a two-metre diameter flywheel, several stamps, a large cast iron box popularly known as a gold box. He was looking at a dismantled five-stamp gold mill worth over thirty-five thousand US dollars.

In the wall against which the mill components were, he saw an inclined seam with the width of a common brick. Egg-yellow streaks embedded in the seam gleamed in the lamp light. The stratum was visibly rich. For a minute, he admired it, whistling quietly in disbelief and wondering if he wasn't in a dreamy realm. It cost him effort to pry his eyes off the sandwiched rock layer.

Trapezoidal items stacked in a far corner caught his attention. He staggered to the corner; excitement and shock undermined his composure. Unbeknown to him, he was sobbing. When he reached the corner, he thought he would discover miniature caskets or containers holding ritualistic items as found in Egyptian Pyramids.

As he neared the items, expecting to see customary spares of the stamp mill, he saw that the pieces weren't actually trapezoidal. He squatted and gaped at four familiar items he had only seen on television and in bank robbery movies. Optical illusion, a remote fear of the unknown and the darkness had given the items a false coffin-like appearance.

Setting the lamp down, he tried to lift the topmost one, and strained in vain. With both hands, he lifted it and quickly set it back on top of the others. The density convinced him the substance was what he had killed for on the goldfield. He wanted to be certain. From the ore-strewn floor, he picked a pointed rock fragment and scratched the one on top. The fragment scratched dirt and left a

confirmatory gleaming line. He was looking at four standard bars of refined gold. Basing on the estimated weight of the first ingot, the gold bars were about forty-five kilograms apiece.

The discovery overwhelmed him. Binga sank on his knees, hugged the gold and cried like a bereaved man, his cries echoing endlessly. Hiccups seized him, painfully disrupting his crying. Between the cries, he thought he heard a sudden swirl of air and sat on his hunches, afraid he had woken something from decades of slumber. Apart from the dull quakes of the hiccups, no other sound escaped from him. His eyes roamed the walls and the floor, resting for a while on the skeleton. The remains were motionless. In all directions, nothing stirred.

The thirteen scars on his head twitched. He felt the temperature rising. Sweat beads erupted on his forehead. Blood trickled from one nostril, and the other followed suit, landing in spatters on the topmost gold bar.

“*Uho-u!*” he shouted in spite of himself, rising and impersonally striking his chest with clenched fists.

“*Uho-u... Uho-u... Uho-u,*” the cavity responded in diminishing echoes.

Immediately, he knew Matipa and Peza were in grave danger. So were the villagers of Ndieme and beyond on both sides of the border.

The End



Basil Diki is traditionally a polemic dramatist and a stage director. He is the author of *SHROUDED BLESSINGS*, and *THE LORD OF ANOMY*, both published by Langaa. He also wrote *THE TRIBE OF GRAVES*, published elsewhere, all plays. *TWO HANGMEN, ONE SCAFFOLD*, written with sagacity in two parts; *BOOK I: BAITING THE HANGMAN* and *BOOK II: IN THE HANGMAN'S SHADOW*, is his debut novel. The writer won several awards for his plays and productions, notably Special Mention, Poetry and Drama, under the 2001 ZIMBABWE BOOK PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION WRITING AND PUBLISHING AWARDS and the 2004 Best Play and Production Award under the ZIMBABWE INVITATIONAL ONE-ACT FESTIVAL hosted by Campbell Theatre. Kadoma is Basil Diki's hometown, but the writer now lives in Harare with his three children and entrepreneurial wife, Joleen. Despite being a boundless writer, demonology and comparative religious studies remain his pastime.

WHEN A CORRELATION EMERGES BETWEEN A PROPHECY AND A POLICE INVESTIGATION, AND A KIDNAPPER MAINTAINS HIS PRESENCE AT A CRIME SCENE, A WOMAN DREADS THE PASSAGE OF TIME. SHE CANNOT UNDERSTAND WHY A MAN SET AN INNOCENT TEENAGER ON FIRE AND KIDNAPPED HER SON. THE KIDNAPPED BOY'S FATHER KNOWS WHEN TWO WARRING HANGMEN STAND ON THE SAME SCAFFOLD, ONE MUST BOW TO THE OTHER OR DIE.

INTO THE FRAY COMES A GAME RANGER, AN EX-DECATHLETE EXPERT AT TRACKING MAN-EATING CROCODILES. HOWEVER, A SENATOR TWICE HIS AGE COUNTING HER FERTILITY DAYS DESPERATELY WANTS HIM IN BED. SHE ISN'T AWARE HER SWEETHEART IS IN THE BELLY OF A WORLD NO CRIMINOLOGIST CAN UNDERSTAND. AS MAYHEM TAKES CENTRE-STAGE IN A COMMUNITY SUFFERING THE BRUNT OF A VEILED MATRIX OF CALAMITIES, IS THE RANGER FURTHER BAIT, A WEAPON OR A SACRIFICIAL RAM BETWEEN CROUCHING OUTLAWS? OR HE RISKS TOTAL RUIN.



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